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MELANTHE;

OR,

THE DAYS OF THE MEDICI.

A Tale of the Fifteenth Century.

BY

MRS. MABERLY,

AUTHOR OF "EMILY;" "THE LOVE MATCH," &c.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

JOHN MITCHELL,

BOOKSELLER AND PUBLISHER TO THE QUEEN.

33, OLD BOND STREET.

MDCCCXLIII.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY J. MITCHELL AND CO. (LATE BRETTELL),
RUPERT STREET, HAYMARKET.

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MELANTHE ;

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CHAPTER I.

THE first care of Borgia, upon quitting the presence of Melanthe after the interview in the Convent, which had converted him into a bitter enemy, was to devise some plan by which his vengeance might surely reach her. The forfeit of her liberty or life was not the punishment he contemplated. He knew too well that a mind like that of Melanthe would gladly welcome such deliverance from the torture he hoped to inflict. Convinced that the attachment which subsisted between her and Montesecco was more serious than he had at first imagined, the Cardinal resolved

upon a double vengeance. He was too deeply versed in the feelings of the mind not to be certain that to a nature so elevated and pure as that of his destined victim, the agony of being despised by the being she fondly loved, would be the greatest misery which could be inflicted ; and he determined to lose no time in so arranging his plans, that the guilt of Melanthe should be made apparent to Montesecco, before the possibility could exist of her holding any communication with him.

To effect this, two things were necessary. The first was, to seclude his victim so that it should be impossible for her to make known her distress. This, by means of his numerous emissaries, would be easily accomplished ; and with what success, the fruitless endeavours of Mariana to obtain the intelligence she required, soon rendered apparent. The next step was more difficult, and for some time the Cardinal hesitated as to the course he should pursue ; any appearance of mystery or design would have the effect of awakening suspicion in the mind of Montesecco. Anonymous communications would probably meet with little or no attention ; and, should the name of Borgia appear,

the wily Cardinal well knew that his hopes would end in disappointment. It therefore became expedient to have recourse to the aid of others; and Borgia cast his eyes around, in order to discover a fitting agent.

After mature deliberation, his choice was made. Calling to mind the anxiety which Luca Pitti had betrayed when the love of Montesecco for Melanthe had first become known to him, the Cardinal decided that some secret reason existed which rendered the prospect of their union distasteful to him. The power which Luca Pitti seemed to exercise over the young Condottiere had not been unobserved by Borgia; and without seeking to ascertain its cause, he resolved to turn the circumstance to the furtherance of his own designs.

Borgia seldom allowed a long interval to elapse between the arrangement of his plans and their execution. The morning after the unhappy Melanthe had been driven from the Convent, the Cardinal bent his steps towards the residence of Luca Pitti. A day later, and the sorrow which he meditated for his victim might, by accidental circumstances, have been averted. He found Luca

Pitti on the eve of his departure for Florence. The return of a secret messenger had brought to the conspirators intelligence which almost surpassed their hopes. The mission of Francesco de' Pazzi to his uncle Jacopo, had been crowned with success, but not without difficulty, for the heart of the old man leaned to the Medici. The aggrandizement of their families was at that time the darling passion of the Italian nobles, and individual honour or safety was constantly sacrificed to obtain this end.

Jacopo de' Pazzi loved the young Lorenzo and Giuliano as his sons; but even his own children, had they opposed themselves to the interests of the house of the Pazzi, which, second only to the Medici in point of riches and influence, aimed at the sole government of Florence, would in all probability have been sacrificed to the pride and ambition of the family. Jacopo was its head; and while the weakest of its members clamoured for support, the strongest threatened revenge if thwarted, until the old man trembled and faltered. Francesco, the leader of the conspiracy, saw his advantage, and cunningly impressed upon his uncle the absolute necessity of yielding, ere the torrent should

sweep past, and overwhelm him. Then, who would credit the assertion of his innocence? who would value the profession of his faith? Involved in a common ruin, or success, who would inquire which branch still flourished on the tree, or which had perished? Feeble and terrified, Jacopo listened to this false reasoning, until, having once admitted the idea, it grew and strengthened, and the head of the Pazzi suffered his name to be enrolled as leader of the conspiracy.

From that hour all seemed to prosper. Montughi, the villa of Jacopo, situated about a mile from Florence, was the spot chosen for the meetings of the discontented; and many of the citizens, gaining courage to avow a spirit of jealousy and impatience of the control of the Medici, under which they had long chafed, secretly resorted thither; while influence and money soon lent to the movements of the conspirators a much more serious aspect than Francesco, on his arrival at Florence, had anticipated. So rapidly had the organization of the malcontents within the city been effected, that it had become an imperative necessity to assure them of the long-promised auxiliary aid;

and messengers were instantly dispatched to all the foreign powers implicated in the infamous transaction.

The death of Piero de' Medici, which had taken place immediately upon the return of Lorenzo from Rome, had infused new spirit into the hearts of the discontented nobles and citizens, whose jealousy was still more keenly aroused by the almost unanimous deference with which the magistrates had entreated Lorenzo to assume the reins of government. No time was to be lost, as every day added to the strength of those, whose only crime was being already too popular, and too firmly fixed in the authority coveted by their opponents. The news of their progress had been instantly dispatched to Rome. Military support was the next step to which they would find it necessary to resort, and the adhesion of Montesecco to the plot, was now deemed a matter of vital importance.

To this end, the Pope had entrusted Luca Pitti with unlimited power, should the young Condottiere persist in his refusal to attempt to overthrow the existing government of Florence by any means less honourable than open hostility. Unwilling,

by too frank an avowal of his doubts with regard to the success of such a scheme, to throw any obstacle in the way of an undertaking by which he hoped to reap the reward of his long suppressed hatred to the Medici, Luca Pitti accepted the mission of the Pope. The offer of a principality, and the possession of revenues proportionate to its grandeur, was the tempting bait held out to the Condottiere; but even this, which the dependent position of Montesecco would, on any other terms, have rendered acceptable, was felt by Luca Pitti to be insufficient to shake the honour and integrity of him whose adhesion they sought. Conviction of the justice of their cause, or the unworthiness of their destined victim, would, he imagined, be the sole condition by which the co-operation of Montesecco could be secured. But to make treachery assume the garb of justice, or brand with ignominy the idol of the Florentine public, was a task which appeared to Luca Pitti almost hopeless. Notwithstanding, his word was pledged. The wishes of the Pope, and the hopes of his confederates in infamy, rested upon this point; and Luca Pitti prepared to fulfil his promise.

The day was fixed for his departure on his journey to join Montesecco, when, to his surprise, late in the night which preceded it, and disguised so as to baffle all attempt at discovery, the Cardinal Borgia stood before him. Deep was the conference which ensued ; and could the feelings which separately animated the breasts of these monsters of deceit and villainy have been laid bare, each would have started to find himself outdone in baseness.

Yet, with the mean distrust natural to the wicked, neither wholly confided in the other. Luca Pitti carefully avoided all allusion to the motives of his anxiety to prevent an union between Melanthe and Montesecco ; and the Cardinal was equally on his guard to conceal the spirit of revenge which prompted his actions. Affecting to be solely actuated by sympathy for the feelings of Luca Pitti towards Montesecco, which he had imparted to him upon a former occasion, Borgia merely recounted the facts, by distorting which he had already contrived to steal from Melanthe the friendship of Jacopo Orsini and his daughter ; adding, the important discovery he pretended to have made, of her intention to appeal to

Montesecco for assistance. Having sufficiently awakened the fears of Luca Pitti, he suddenly proposed to him, in case he should succeed in detaching Montesecco from Melanthe, an union between him and Giulia, daughter of the eldest of the Colonna, an alliance which he pretended he had been charged to negotiate by the Pope, who, in the event of the concurrence of Montesecco, had promised a rich dowry for his bride.

The sallow cheek of Luca Pitti showed more plainly than he could have wished, how clearly the deep insight of Borgia had read the feelings he had endeavoured to conceal; still, though his heart bounded at the prospect of the realization of his secret hopes, his cautious tongue refused to promise that which hereafter it might not be his interest to perform. Vague, therefore, were the assurances of gratitude with which he received the offers of the Cardinal; nevertheless, the latter that night quitted the house of the dissembler, fully satisfied that his insidious arguments had produced the desired effect—the separation of Melanthe and Montesecco was secured; and the profligate Cardinal, as he retraced his steps towards his sumptuous palace,

gloated over the misery he was about to cause, nor did one pang of remorse or pity enter his iron heart as he contemplated his own cowardly act of oppression and revenge. He had succeeded. The helpless girl, whose love was her only wealth and hope, would be utterly crushed by his malice. He revelled in the thought; for the fiendish nature of the man now urged him to scoff at the passion which was raging in his breast, until he persuaded himself that the gratification of it would be far inferior to the delight he experienced from the certainty of revenge.

“Revenge!—yes, to me, sweeter far, than love is—revenge!” muttered the Cardinal, as he strode along the deserted streets of Rome. And, perhaps, at that moment he thought so.

CHAPTER II.

THE feelings of Melanthe, as she quitted the prison of Elphenor, and regained her home, were of a nature so exciting and complicated, that for some time she could not decide whether joy or sorrow predominated. The rapture of being restored to her father at one instant filled her soul ; while the next brought with it the idea of Borgia ; and the blood, chilled back from her heart, ran shivering along her veins as his image rose to her view. She trembled as she contemplated the horror of placing herself voluntarily in the power of such a man. Still she did not hesitate. Had she not promised her father ? *Her father !* How often did Melanthe repeat these words, till their magic sound seemed to lull all fear. The sense of desolation was gone—the feeling of dependance had passed away ; and gratitude towards Heaven, and towards him,

who, under its presiding influence, had cherished her infant years, and preserved her for the happiness of the present hour, filled the throbbing heart of Melanthe ! Humbly on her knees did she pour forth her thanks to God, and implore his protection through the trial which awaited her ! Nor were the names of Hassan and Gennaro forgotten in her prayers.

Thus had many hours worn away after her return from the prison, when the officious zeal of Mariana disturbed her devotions. Disappointed at the abrupt dismissal with which Melanthe had greeted her offer of attendance upon her return to her home, Mariana had for some time contented herself, either with suppressing her annoyance in sullen silence, or giving utterance to it in querulous attacks upon Stefano for his stupidity in not having discovered the departure of his mistress, or even the hour at which she had quitted the house that morning. In vain the patient Stefano endeavoured to convince her that if he was in fault, she was equally to blame. Mariana would not rest satisfied ; and irritated by the certainty of the existence of a secret which she had not been able to discover, she

determined that Melanthe should not remain in the seclusion of her apartment, whither she had immediately retired, upon her return home. Coming to any decision is ever preferable to remaining in harassing uncertainty ; and the spirit of Mariana grew more tranquil, as she bent her steps to the chamber of Melanthe, and, clamouring for admission, began to urge the almost maternal right which she had to the confidence of her Signora.

Melanthe did not debate the point ; but instantly admitting her faithful servant, she at once gratified her curiosity ; and communicated the joyful intelligence which was the result of her day's absence. In this, Melanthe was actuated by two motives. The one was the feeling of grateful affection with which she remembered the long and faithful services of Mariana, which entitled her to this confidence ; and the next was, the bitter recollection of the manner in which her own former absence from home had been perverted into a foundation for the basest calumny.

The joy of Mariana was expressed by the most extravagant demonstrations ; she wept, laughed, and prayed by turns ; and was only recalled to

composure, by being reminded that much yet remained to be done, ere they might hope to welcome Elphenor to his home.

The repugnance of Melanthe to mention the name of Borgia, almost tempted her to conceal the promise she had made to solicit from him in person the release of her father: but recollecting the danger which might ensue, should her true motive for such a visit remain unexplained, she hastily detailed to Mariana the necessity of again leaving the house, at an early hour on the following morning.

In vain Mariana entreated permission to accompany her. Melanthe steadily refused. The passion of Borgia was to her an idea of such pollution, that she could not bear the chance of its becoming known to another. Mariana, whose head was giddy from curiosity, submitted impatiently to this rejection of her services; and the next morning, with a mixed feeling of apprehension and disappointment, she conducted Melanthe to the gate of the palace of the Cardinal; and having seen her enter it, returned to the house of Hassan.

Refusing to give her name, Melanthe followed

the person, to whom she had addressed her inquiry as to the possibility of seeing the Cardinal, to a small ante room, where she was requested to wait until the answer of his Eminence could be obtained. She was not, however, kept long in suspense; for the secretary of Borgia, who had undertaken to deliver the message, had noted, as Melanthe, on entering the room threw back her veil, the rare beauty of the countenance it had at first concealed, and such visitors he well knew were ever welcome to his Eminence, the Cardinal Borgia.

In a short time a gracious answer was returned; and before Melanthe could consider in what words she might best clothe her request, she had passed the threshold of his chamber,—the door closed—and she found herself alone with Borgia. The start of surprise with which the Cardinal recognised his visitor was not seen by her; and in another moment the self-possession with which he addressed her, and, in terms of courtesy, entreated her to be seated, in some degree restored her tranquillity. She ventured to raise her eyes. Those of the Cardinal were fixed upon some writing he held in his hand, and Melanthe hurriedly glanced round the room.

All that she had ever heard of the luxury of Borgia was far surpassed by that which she beheld. The apartment in which he sat, was not so much distinguished by its size as the costly furniture with which it was filled. The most exquisite taste was displayed in its arrangement. Rare paintings adorned the walls, and draperies of the richest velvet shaded the lofty windows; while the floor of the chamber, composed entirely of precious woods inlaid with ivory, was only partially covered with the gorgeous carpets of the East. To look upon the soft luxuriousness, and to breathe the perfumed atmosphere of the apartment, no one could have imagined it to be the dwelling of a churchman, bound by his vows to frugality, and mortification of all temporal desires.

The appearance of Borgia would still less have justified such suspicion. In the full vigour of his age, nothing was omitted which could set off to advantage the personal distinctions of which he was so proud. Restricted to the use of certain colours, he yet contrived that his close-fitting suit of purple cloth should be of the finest texture and most brilliant hue, admirably relieved by slashings of

velvet, and fastened at the wrists and throat with pearls of enormous value. Jewels of every colour glittered on his fingers; and his hand, of the beauty of which he was perfectly conscious, was fully displayed by the tight and inverted cuff of rich lace, the points of which were attached to the sleeve by buttons of rubies and diamonds. The use of jewels not having been very long permitted to ecclesiastics, the rage for them was extreme, and those of Borgia were estimated at a very large sum.

There was one point, however, the concession of which, not even the credit of the Cardinal could wring from any of the Pontiffs over whom he had successively exercised an almost despotic sway. The shaven crown still continued an indispensable mark of Priesthood; and Borgia, with the rest, was forced to submit. But as the extent of the sacrifice was not regulated by law, he contrived that his hair should be so cut, as at will the circle might be concealed by the redundant locks with which nature had endowed him; and which, mingling with the beard of glossy blackness, always trimmed and perfumed with scrupulous neatness, not a little

contributed to the effect of the handsome and striking person of the Cardinal.

As he sat before Melanthe in his luxurious chamber, his arm resting upon the writing table, whose crimson covering of velvet, deeply fringed with gold, swept upon the floor, his rich and stately appearance differed widely from that in which she had last beheld him. But not more changed were his garments than were apparently his feelings. Unaccustomed to fathom the depth of dissimulation to which a nature like that of Borgia could stoop, Melanthe eagerly persuaded herself, that in the courteous tone and bland smile with which the Cardinal welcomed her unexpected presence, there existed perhaps a wish to repair the sorrows he had already caused her; and a feeling of hope arose in her bosom, which, alas! had no better foundation than in the nobleness of her own heart, incapable of nourishing an implacable resentment. After a few moments, during which the Cardinal seemed absorbed in the perusal of the paper which he held in his hand, but which in reality were stolen for the purpose of deciding upon

the manner in which this unexpected interview was to be conducted, Borgia raised his eyes towards Melanthe, and apologizing for having thus momentarily withdrawn his attention from her, he continued,

“ I might have pleaded surprise as an excuse for not sooner inquiring to what fortunate circumstance I am indebted for the honour of your visit, had I not been aware that filial affection supersedes all other in the bosom of the Signora Melanthe - - - ”

“ How ? ” exclaimed Melanthe, “ you already know - - - ”

“ Yes ! ” replied Borgia, as Melanthe, overcome by her astonishment, paused for an instant. “ I already know that the wishes of your heart are accomplished ; and that yesterday in the prisoner, who, under the assumed title of one of the Greek philosophers, had been confined in Saint Angelo, you discovered Elphenor ; and in the arms of your newly found father, forgot the hatred you had vowed to Roderigo Borgia.”

“ No ! not forgot,” said Melanthe, alarmed by the look of the Cardinal, as he pronounced the last

words; “not forgot, but - - -” and again she stopped, fearful of saying too little or too much.

“You cannot then forget and forgive?” said Borgia gently.

“No!” replied Melanthe solemnly; “but I can remember and forgive. Yes—all shall be forgiven—all—the sorrow which you have caused me—the sin to which you would have tempted me; and the blighted name which, alas! is now mine through your means—all shall be forgiven, if you will restore to me my father!”

“It will be difficult—if not impossible,” said Borgia.

“Oh! not impossible,” exclaimed Melanthe. “You have the power—be generous—and use it. See, how I have trusted you—I, against whom you vowed eternal wrath. I, a poor helpless girl,—I have come to you—alone—to pray for my father. My poor father!” continued Melanthe, kneeling as she spoke, “have pity on him!—For years he has not seen the light of day—for years no voice of kindness has reached him in his dungeon. Shut out from all, he has grown old in darkness and in

chains—forgotten and alone ! Alone for years !—
Oh !—Cardinal, as you are great, so be merciful !
He was not guilty—and had he been so, still let
the kindness of your heart plead for him. Have
you no sin, for which you hope to be forgiven ? ”

The tears of Melanthe choked her utterance ;
and still kneeling upon the ground, she wept
unrestrainedly. But the Cardinal did not speak,
nor bid her rise. His whole thoughts were filled
with her beauty, and the words she had spoken
fell unheeded on his ear. The unholy passion,
which had been smothered and not extinguished
in his breast, blazed forth afresh. Hitherto, he
had only seen Melanthe reserved and haughty,
sternly reproofing his impious advances, and with
marble coldness restraining every word and look.
But now the statue was warmed into life—he
beheld her at his feet ; and the heart of the licen-
tious Cardinal beat wildly, as he contemplated the
touching graces with which her new character of
suppliant had invested her. She was so perfectly
beautiful as she knelt before him, her whole being
animated with the passion of her entreaty, that the
sated fancy of the profligate Borgia beamed again

into freshness on imagining the possibility of gaining the affection of a creature so passionate and so true.

Wild as were the wishes that throbbed within his breast, they did not for an instant obscure the extraordinary perspicacity with which he was gifted. The heart of Melanthe was laid bare to his glance ; and he saw that, although fortune had thus led her to his feet, no feeling of love, or intention of compromise, had hastened her steps. Strong in her uprightness, and resolute in her duty, the noble girl was there to pray for a father's life ; and for that alone. Yet, at that very moment, while any one less monstrous than the man before whom she knelt, would have pitied and respected, the base soul of the Cardinal was plotting her destruction. Ere he spoke again, his plan was decided.

“ Rise, I entreat,” he said in his softest manner. “ The heart of Borgia is not of stone, that it is thus difficult to soften. Of what crime was Elphenor specially accused ? ”

“ Of conspiracy against his Holiness and the Roman state,” replied Melanthe.

“It is strange,” observed Borgia, anxious to appear ignorant of a secret of which he had always been possessed ;—“it is most strange, that until now I never should have heard of his case. And he is alone ?”

“Alas ! no !” replied Melanthe ; “many others were confined with him at the same time ; but, with the exception of some few, their fate is unknown. Surely the mercy I implore for him will extend also to his companions,” she added timidly, for the horrors of the prison were still present to her mind.

“Doubtless,” answered the Cardinal, withdrawing his gaze from the face of Melanthe, as he beheld the blushes which covered it on perceiving his look of admiration ; “doubtless their claims to pardon will be carefully examined. The Holy Church is merciful—and I, as one of its Fathers, have some power. But,” he continued, changing his manner to one of secrecy and confidence, “were I to exert this power too openly, it might defeat its own end. Will you promise, that if I swear to liberate your father, the means by which his freedom has been obtained shall remain for ever a

secret? I would prove to you that the past is forgotten, and that no rancour dwells within the heart whose affection you rejected.—Will you promise what I ask?”

The air of Borgia was so true, his manner so free from any appearance of design or hesitation, that Melanthe, notwithstanding her distrust, was completely deceived by it.

“I will promise,” she said, “and may Heaven reward you for these words!”

“Have you no fear?” asked the Cardinal, wishing still more securely to engage her unresisting confidence; “have you no fear of the sincerity of one who had vowed to persecute you?”

“No,” replied Melanthe; “I have said that I trusted you.”

“Do you not think it possible, that this promise of succour to your father may be but a feint—a feint to delude you into the power of one whose love you have scorned?”

“No,” said Melanthe steadily; but the Cardinal could see that a shudder passed over her. “The nature of man is not so base. Man—responsible

to his Creator for the uses of his power—could not be so cowardly, or so vile. Cardinal, I am not afraid ;” and Melanthe, as she spoke, filled with the elevation of soul engendered by the sublime consciousness of virtue, held out her hand to the Cardinal, in token of the confidence she reposed in his honour.

The lips of Borgia scarcely touched the fingers of Melanthe, as he bowed his head before her ; but the fire which rushed through his veins had nearly overpowered his reason. It was the delirium of passion, and anticipation of revenge, and not the sting of conscience, nor the pity of a relenting heart, which had momentarily mastered the spirit of the Cardinal. Soon recovering his wonted composure, he continued :—“ I am flattered by your assurance, and now, to put your veracity to the proof, I will pray you to recount to me the manner in which you contrived to penetrate the prison walls, hitherto deemed inaccessible to strangers.”

Melanthe, without hesitation, related to him the circumstances attendant upon her admission, accompanying the recital with an urgent entreaty that no blame should be imputed to Ramiro.

The Cardinal listened patiently, though at times a look of savage joy lighted up his features, as his eye glanced towards some object which lay upon his table. Melanthe, engrossed by her own anxiety, did not observe the movement, and concluded her recital with a prayer for the pardon of Ramiro, should the act of her admittance to the prison have been an infringement of its rules.

“He shall not only have pardon, but reward,” was the answer of Borgia, as, turning from Melanthe, to conceal the demoniacal smile which he could not suppress, he rang a small silver bell which lay upon a table beside him. The same secretary, who had conducted Melanthe to the presence of the Cardinal, appeared in answer to his summons; and Borgia hastily writing a few words upon a slip of paper, delivered it with a short sentence in the Spanish language, which was unintelligible to Melanthe.

Soon after the secretary had retired, Ramiro entered the apartment. The old man was pale and trembling; yet having once perceived the presence of Melanthe, forbore again to look towards the spot where she sat; for, terrified by the summons which

had brought him early that morning to the palace of the Cardinal, he feared to implicate his benefactress in the danger which he instinctively felt was hanging over him. How was he astonished, when, instead of the censure and condemnation which his disobedience had merited, the Cardinal, addressing him in gentle tones, inquired how long he had been gaoler of St. Angelo?

“Twenty-five years,” replied Ramiro.

“Indeed,” observed the Cardinal, who had the peculiar talent of appearing surprised at what he best knew.

“It is a long time to have held the same office, and with unblemished fidelity.”

Ramiro, not deeming it prudent to criminate himself, merely bowed to this insinuated question; and the Cardinal went on. “The Holy Church is bountiful to such of her servants as she can implicitly trust; and the Signora,” pointing to Melanthe, “has assured us of the inviolable faith with which Ramiro ever watches over his prisoners. Some reward is due to such long service.”

“ I humbly thank your Eminence,” said Ramiro, who was too much overcome by the delight of having escaped so easily, to articulate more than was absolutely necessary.

“ We will spare your thanks, my good friend,” said the Cardinal, as the same smile, though strongly repressed, gleamed across his face ; “ and your fidelity shall have its reward. Take this key, and unlock yonder cabinet. Within, you will find what will render you independent of all earthly cares.”

Thus speaking, Borgia raised from the table a large golden key, the handle of which was set with jewels, and pointing to a cabinet of ebony, inlaid with marbles of various colours, which stood at the further end of the room, Ramiro advanced towards it, and inserted the key in the lock. For a few moments it resisted his endeavours to turn it, when Borgia, whose keen eye was fixed upon the old man, exclaimed,

“ Press harder, my good Ramiro ; he who locks, should surely be able to unlock.”

Ramiro obeyed his instructions. He pressed the key ; but, as it turned in the lock, and the

doors flew open, he started, and withdrew his hand, from which, on holding it up, a few drops of blood fell upon the floor.

“ You have hurt yourself, I fear,” said the Cardinal anxiously.

“ No, it is nothing—a mere scratch, please your Eminence,” answered Ramiro, at the same time putting his other hand to his forehead.

“ The gold within the cabinet is yours,” said Borgia, pointing to the now open doors.

“ Where ?” said Ramiro, stupidly.

“ There, upon the shelves—do you not see it ?” asked Borgia, advancing towards him.

“ No ! it is dark—so dark,” said Ramiro, extending his arms, as if to support himself ; and cold. “ Help ! help ! - - - ” he muttered, in smothered tones.

Melanthe sprung to his assistance ; but ere she could cross the room, he had sunk upon the floor ; and when she knelt by his side, and took his hand, it fell heavily from her grasp. With a shudder, she leant across, and placed her fingers upon the old man’s heart—there was no pulse - - - Melanthe stealthily raising her eyes towards the Cardinal,

saw him wrap his hand in a handkerchief, as, with scrupulous care, he drew the golden key from the lock ; then by a secret spring the doors closed of themselves ; and the *murderer* smiled, as he threw a careless glance on the body of poor Ramiro, whose reward indeed had been greater than his desert - - -

“ We will leave Ramiro to the care of the physician,” said Borgia, in the softest tone, as he took the hand of Melanthe, to lead her from the apartment. Melanthe, stupified with horror, obeyed mechanically ; for, as her eye caught the features of the corpse already fixing into rigidity, she thought of the lonely dungeon of St. Angelo, and the old man who sat there in chains.

CHAPTER III.

A FEW hurried words were all that now passed between the Cardinal and Melanthe. Receiving from Borgia the most solemn assurance that she would be conducted to a spot where, without danger, her father might immediately join her, she suffered herself to be placed within the litter, which, with its bearers, stood prepared in the hall of the palace. The curtains were drawn, and, sinking back upon the cushions, she resigned herself to the feeling of necessity which now alone urged her forward. The horrible scene which she had just witnessed, although she dared not positively affix to it the stigma of murder, had paralysed every power of resistance. She felt around her the deadly coils of the serpent, who needed but a symptom of fear, or shrinking, on the part of his victim, to crush her within his folds,

and passive obedience was all that now seemed left to her.

Thus far the design of Borgia had been crowned with success. To terrify where he could not at once subdue, was part of his system ; and although the atrocity of which he had just been guilty had been planned before the visit of Melanthe could have been anticipated, no sooner was she in his presence, than he determined that such an exhibition of his power could not fail of striking with awe the mind which had hitherto so bravely sustained itself against his threats.

The murder of Ramiro was only the prelude of many more, which history records of this sanguinary tyrant, Borgia. Poison, administered in every variety of form, was the mode in which he generally sought deliverance from his enemies, or those who might become such ; and it is a singular fact, that it was by the very means which he had so often adopted, that his own impious course was at last arrested ; and that while under the title of Alexander VI., and filling the Papal chair, to attain which he had not scrupled to commit the crimes of perjury, simony, and wholesale murder,

he should at length, together with Cesare, his son, of equal notoriety in infamy, perish miserably from incautiously drinking some poisoned wine, set apart for the destruction of three Cardinals, whose immense wealth, in the event of their death (it being forbidden to them to dispose of their possessions by will) reverted to the Holy See*.

The poisoned key was one of the favourite devices of Borgia. The poison was contained in the handle; and, as the lock of the cabinet was constructed expressly, a sharp pressure was necessary to open it; this effort moved a spring, which raised a little pointed tube, that, penetrating the skin, injected into the veins venom of a nature so subtle that instantaneous death was the consequence.

In those days, when might was law, and hypocrisy religion, none ventured to inquire farther. The physician of Borgia was summoned to view the corpse; and smiled as he beheld the

* The names of the three Cardinals were Casanova, Melchior Copis, and Adriano Castellense. The two last had only been recently created, and had paid to the Pope the enormous sum of 40,000 ducats as the price of their election.

potency of the drug he had himself compounded, and to which he owed the favour of the monster he served, who impiously daring to cover the deed he had done with the semblance of charity, always ordered masses to be sung for the soul of the deceased, and the expenses of the funeral to be defrayed out of his own purse. It was done ;—and if, within the secret recesses of the human breast, some spirit struggled to cry aloud, and curse the fiend beneath whose might it trembled, the dastard fear of torture and of death rose up, and froze the words upon his lips.

The discovery of Elphenor by Melanthe threatened to annihilate the plans which Borgia had originally formed ; and, rendered frantic by the unexpected circumstance, the punishment of poor Ramiro, through whose means it had occurred, was the first step necessary to the vengeance of the Cardinal. The next which he meditated was the destruction of Elphenor : but this was deferred ; for the sudden appearance of Melanthe had so completely disturbed the senses of Borgia, that love, with all its fever and inconsistency, took possession of his breast more forcibly than ever.

His projects of vengeance were laid aside, and, now certain of his prey, he waited, in security and silence, but the moment to bend her spirit to his will.

Melanthe was so deeply plunged in the lethargy of helplessness which her strange situation engendered, that, during the journey which had been thus unexpectedly forced upon her, she made no effort to discover towards what quarter of the city she was borne. Apparently the place of her destination was at some distance from the palace of the Cardinal, for, by the movement of her litter, she guessed that its bearers had more than once been changed. At length they stood still, and the curtains being withdrawn, she found herself at the door of an apartment, into which she was ushered with much courtesy by a grave and matronly personage, the kindness of whose manner somewhat re-assured her visitor. Further communication seemed, however, impossible, for upon addressing an inquiry to her companion relative to the situation of the house in which she now found herself, the woman shook her head, and muttered a few words in Spanish, a language unknown to Melanthe,

but which, from being the native tongue of Borgia, convinced her that the house to which she had been conducted belonged to him. The woman quitted the room, and soon returning, laid upon the table a variety of fruits and other refreshments, with wine, after which Melanthe remained alone.

Hour after hour glided by, and yet no tidings from the city reached her. At one moment she would chide her own impatience, and consider that the event for which she pined could not so speedily be accomplished; and at another, she sat with uplifted head watching for every sound, as the haste with which she had been conducted to her present abode seemed to leave little doubt that the liberation of Elphenor would be immediate; and that, for better security, the Cardinal would probably accompany him. Still the hours passed on, and the silence around her continued unbroken.

Wearied by expectation, Melanthe rose from her seat, and endeavoured to discover what was the nature of the spot in which she was immured. But her hope was vain. The windows were at such a height from the floor that it was impossible to reach them; and round the walls of the circular apart-

ment she hopelessly sought for the door by which she had entered. Not a flaw was to be discovered in the rich hangings of crimson velvet which decorated the walls, and the borders, of jasper and gold, alike presented to the eye of Melanthe a surface so even and perfect, that she soon perceived it was not possible they could conceal an entrance to the room. This discovery filled her with uneasiness, and she now remarked, for the first time, the paintings which decorated the ceiling and the walls, and the general air of luxury pervading the apartment. The impression was peculiarly distasteful to her, and she returned to her seat and gave herself up to the sadness of her reflections. There was more of despondency in her heart than she would have dared to confess to herself at a time when she anticipated a reunion with her father ; but, from the moment when the dying glance of Ramiro had met her view, distrust had gone far to annihilate the confidence with which the words and manner of the Cardinal had before inspired her.

The day so eventful in the fate of Melanthe was now drawing to a close, the fitful blaze of the wood fire, and the glimmer of the stars through the high

windows had for some time alone lighted the apartment, when a sudden glare aroused its solitary inmate, and she turned her head just in time to see two of the large mirrors placed round the walls disappear as if by magic, giving to view an alcove, arranged with the most exquisite taste as a sleeping apartment. The soft light of the alabaster lamps fell upon the draperies of pale blue velvet, bordered with silver fringe; and Melanthe was still gazing with wonder at this sudden apparition, when the Spanish attendant, who had received her on her arrival, entered from the alcove, followed by a Moorish page, who presented sweetmeats and wine, while the woman busied herself with the arrangement of lamps in various parts of the room. It was a scene of enchantment; yet Melanthe would fain have exchanged its glories for the shelter of the meanest hovel, where she could have laid down her weary head in freedom and security. Loathing the splendour by which she was surrounded, she hastily declined all that was offered to her; and feeling it to be the only way of avoiding the officiousness of her attendants, she endeavoured by signs to make them understand that all she desired was repose.

The well-trained menials instantly disappeared; and Melanthe, letting fall the light curtain which shaded the alcove, threw herself upon the couch, and, worn out by the anxiety which she had so long endured, was soon asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

SOME hours after Melanthe had found in repose a cessation of her care, a shadow passed across the almost transparent curtain which veiled the entrance to the alcove. It was the shadow of a human form : —noiselessly it had glided to the spot, and noiselessly it paused for a few seconds ; then, as if assured by the regular breathing, which was distinctly audible, that the occupant of the couch slept soundly, a gentle hand drew aside the curtain, and the form of the stranger appeared.

The form was that of a woman, of a beauty so dazzling, that the eye, as it gazed upon her, seemed to ache from the perfection which left it no point of doubt upon which to rest. The stranger advanced, and bending over the couch of Melanthe, seemed attentively to scan every line of the lovely

features before her; and then, as if unsatisfied, raised a small alabaster lamp, and turning its ray upon the couch, gently withdrew the covering which shaded the throat and arms of the sleeper. The hands of the young girl were crossed upon her breast; but so lightly, that its rise and fall were distinctly visible; and the rich vermilion of the full and slightly parted lips, the placid brow, with the deep shadow of the fringed eye-lids, betokened repose so tranquil, that none could have deemed a thought of sorrow or of guilt had ever found a moment's resting place within that breast

It was the sleep of innocence—of youth—of hope; and the beautiful being, who watched above, half smiled as she gazed admiringly upon it; but the smile was followed by a sigh, so heartfelt, that it changed for an instant the expression of a face naturally beaming with a gentle tenderness. Though apparently little older than Melanthe, the more rounded figure, and calm dignity of the stranger, gave her a somewhat more matronly air.

Her beauty was of a cast most rare in her land; for she was brilliantly fair, with eyes of the deepest

blue, and masses of chestnut hair falling in luxuriance upon her shoulders. The splendour of her dress, which was a robe of purple silk, bordered with silver and pearls, spoke of some festive scene which she appeared to have just quitted; but the look of sadness, which might be traced upon her lovely face, was at variance with her beauty and her state.

For a few moments only she paused in contemplation of the charms of the sleeper, which presented so strong a contrast to her own, then gently taking her hand, she drew it towards her. The movement awakened Melanthe, who, raising herself upon her couch, looked with a bewildered air upon the lovely apparition before her.

“Do not be alarmed,” said the stranger, softly; “I come as a friend.”

“Then there is danger,” exclaimed Melanthe, grasping the hand of her companion.

“There is!” said the stranger, solemnly.

“And you have come to save me? Oh! tell me where I am.”

“Is it possible that you do not know?” said the

lady, gravely, while an air of distrust overspread her face.

“Not exactly; but I believe in the house of the Cardinal Borgia. I came hither by his orders, and under the expressed assurance that my father would be restored to liberty, and meet me here.”

“Where is your father? I thought you were the daughter of Hassan the merchant?”

“His daughter only by adoption,” replied Melanthe. “My father is Elphenor.”

“And who is Elphenor?” asked the lady.

“A Greek,” replied Melanthe. “He was the faithful friend and servant of Constantine. After the siege of Constantinople, he took refuge here, but was thrown into prison, where, for years, he has languished. It was only yesterday I knew that he lived. He bade me seek the Cardinal. I did so: he promised his instant release, and under that promise I am here.”

“Is this the fact?” asked the stranger, fixing a stern look upon Melanthe. “Had you no other motive?”

“None. Oh! do not say I have been deceived.

You spoke of danger," added Melanthe, looking round timidly. "Was it to me, or to my father?"

"To both," said the lady, gravely, "or to neither; it will depend upon yourself."

"Oh! speak," cried Melanthe; "tell me how I may avoid it, and my heart will bless you."

"Are you prepared to make the sacrifice required?"

"For any thing," exclaimed Melanthe, "to save my father, and avoid the - - -"

"Avoid the Cardinal," said the lady, quickly, as she observed the hesitation of Melanthe. "He has then persecuted you,—made offers of love, which you have rejected,—and you fear his power;" she continued: but, as she spoke, the breathless earnestness of her manner increased, till an expression of agony contracted her lovely features, as though upon the answer she awaited, hung her very existence. "Speak," she added, almost fiercely, as Melanthe, dreading some new deception, paused ere she gave utterance to a secret which was to her so full of horror.

"Speak! Is it not so? or, - - -" and the face of

the lady grew ghastly pale, as, in a hoarse whisper, she added, "Is it that you love him, and that it is yourself you fear?"

The proud heart of Melanthe revolted at these words, from the interest with which she had at first regarded her companion.

"Who are you?" she said, gently; "and by what right do you thus question one who is a stranger to you?"

"A sinful and degraded being; and it is to prevent your becoming that which I am, that I have now sought you," answered the lady.

"Ah!" exclaimed Melanthe; and, as if by an instinctive movement, she withdrew her hand from that of her companion.

The cheek of the beautiful lady reddened; but there was no anger in her tone, as she exclaimed passionately, "Yes, shrink from me—despise me—but listen to me. If you would not one day curse the hour of your birth—yourself—the world, ay, even the beauty of your children, smiling to your eyes, lest it should lead them to become the same wretched thing as yourself."

"Forgive me; oh! forgive me," said Melanthe,

kindly pressing the hand of the stranger within her own. For a few moments, the sobs of the unhappy woman alone broke the silence; but recovering herself, she said,

“ You ask me who I am? Alas! could I feel joy, it would be to find that one being in Rome knows not the name of the wretched Vanozia! Would you hear my tale? Or, do these tears speak plainly enough the sorrow it contains?”

“ If sympathy can soothe it—then speak,” said Melanthe, whose heart bled for the unhappiness of the beautiful creature who seemed so deeply to feel her situation.

“ I will speak,” she said, endeavouring so stifle her sobs, “ though for years I have suffered in silence. Yes, young as I am, ten years have passed, since I listened to the deceiving words of him who has this day lured you hither. I was an orphan and his ward—nobly born as himself; and I loved him with a love that can end but in the grave. We were married. Yes,” she repeated, as she observed the sudden start of Melanthe, at the word, ‘ Married!’ “ Lulled by his assurances that a dispensation from the Pope had been granted in our favour, we

were married, and for some time lived in Spain, shut out from the world. His uncle, the Pope, summoned him to Rome. We came ; and soon—oh, how soon I awoke from the dream of joy in which, as a wife and a mother, I had passed delicious years, to find,” she continued, as, drawing nearer to the ear of Melanthe, and grasping her hand, as if in agony, she lowered her voice almost to a whisper, “I had been deceived—to find my children cut off from their rights, and myself a mistress, not a wife!—and a mistress neglected and unloved.”

“ Alas ! what bitter grief !” said Melanthe, whose tears flowed fast for a fate apparently so undeserved.

“ Bitter indeed—bitter in its grandeur as in its desolation ! Bitter, when the pampered menial, and greedy sycophant, bow beneath my feet—dreadful, when, in the solemn stillness of the night, the soft winds, as they pass, seem to breathe the curse of God upon a love forbidden by His word ! Bitter, to think upon my sin—but maddening to behold the indifference of him for whose sake I am thus wretched. Oh ! ye who vainly dream that man is grateful for the love ye give, take warning by me !

The love that is unholy is cursed of God! and, cherish it as you will, day by day shall ye behold it fade before your eyes—day by day shall ye watch, with every nerve strung to madness, over your perishing treasure; and the spirit that would remonstrate, and the lip that would complain, shall quiver and sink beneath the blast of indifference, and the crushing weight of satiety!”

Vanozia paused, overcome by the picture she had drawn of her own fate, and, burying her face in her hands, wept aloud. Melanthe, whose generous mind could well sympathize with the sufferings of a modest and virtuous nature, thus tortured by the weakness of passion and the sense of sin, raised herself upon her couch, and drawing the head of the beautiful stranger to her bosom, poured forth words of comfort, and endeavoured to lead her, by hopes of forgiveness, to repentance, and desire of amendment.

“No! no!” replied Vanozia convulsively, “I cannot leave him. Am I not the mother of his children? Lucrezia! Francesco! Cesare! my beauteous children. Could I tear myself from them? Oh, no! In the sight of Heaven I am his

wife, and faithful I will always remain ; and—besides—deceived as I have been, I love him—still.”

Melanthe, who saw that in these words lay the real weight of the tie, which to her mind ought to have been dissolved, upon the discovery of its unholy nature, endeavoured to combat the resolution of Vanozia, by exposing to her the sophistry of her own arguments; but all was vain. The mind of the unhappy woman was too much weakened by a gnawing consciousness of her fault, to struggle against her grief; and Melanthe forbore to insist, when she saw conviction was hopeless, and could only offer up a secret prayer that power from above might be given to poor Vanozia, so to separate in her misery the consequences from the crime, that the spirit of true repentance might enter into her heart ! For a few moments, neither of those, who had thus suddenly been made friends by their misfortunes, could find courage to speak, until Vanozia starting exclaimed,

“ Fool—fool, that I am, to waste the present time in talking of the past. I came to save you, and my selfish grief has led me from my path.

But," she continued, again fixing upon Melanthe a look of distracted fear, "what if you too should have deceived me? if you should be my enemy?"

"Do not give way to such a thought," said Melanthe, who trembled lest Vanozia should again question her as to the conduct of Borgia towards her. "Do not suspect me, but point out the road for my escape from the danger to which you say I am exposed, and I will at once follow your advice."

"Will you leave Rome instantly? Yes, within this hour, and for ever?" asked Vanozia.

"Never!" cried Melanthe; "you forget my father lies in a dungeon; who shall aid him, if I abandon him?"

"I will," said Vanozia solemnly. "By all that I hold most dear—by the memory of departed happiness—by the life of my children, the only joy that is left to me—I swear that if you will depart instantly, your father shall be free to join you wheresoever you may be."

"Alas!" said Melanthe; "the same tale that deluded me hither!"

"Girl," said Vanozia almost fiercely, "do you doubt me?"

“ I am a stranger—why should I trust you ? ” asked Melanthe.

“ But I would save you,” said Vanozia. “ A little while, and it may be too late. You know not what you risk, nor would I sully your maiden ear by a recital—but have you no fear—no fear,” she continued anxiously, as again a jealous pang shot through her heart, “ that you may be taught to love—that he who has persuaded others may also persuade you - - - ”

“ No,” interrupted Melanthe, “ of that I have no fear. I have a talisman—a safeguard—I love another ! ”

The burst of tears with which Vanozia received this declaration, too plainly told the violence of the feelings which she had striven to repress. The extravagance of joy which broke forth, as her worst fears were dispelled, would have terrified Melanthe, had she too not known the strength of that passion which at times defies reason or control ; and she gazed with pity upon the wretched woman, whose chance of happiness was so small, that even the removal of an unwilling rival from her path was a source of transport to her.

The mutual distrust of Vanozia and Melanthe had now vanished ; and the former hastily detailed the plan by which she calculated upon securing the release of Elphenor. Her power over the Cardinal was unbounded, with the exception of the one point, for which she would have sacrificed all others ; and Vanozia, whose disposition was naturally amiable and good, continued to the end of her days to interpose between Borgia and his victims. Before long, she had contrived to prove the truth of her assertions ; and Melanthe humbly lifted up her heart to Heaven for the timely succour which had so unexpectedly reached her.

At first she hesitated as to the expediency of revealing her suspicions with regard to Hassan ; but the prospect of her absence from Rome prompted her to leave nothing undone which might conduce to the safety of one who was scarcely second in her affections to Elphenor. Vanozia readily undertook the office, promising also to convey secretly to Mariana the intelligence of the departure of Melanthe. Convinced that a sincere desire to serve her existed in the bosom of her new friend, as well as anxiety to secure her

departure from Rome, Melanthe suffered Vanozia to make the preparations for her journey, which the hurry of the moment required. The disguise of a peasant had been procured by her ; and Melanthe, covering her own dress with the loose robe and mantle which would effectually prevent her from being recognised, soon stood ready for departure. Aware of the danger to which poverty might expose her during her journey, Vanozia had clasped the pearls which she wore round the neck of the poor girl, who was thus compelled to fly unaided from the storm ; and giving her also a purse of gold, she carefully repeated the instructions as to the path she was to follow on quitting the house, to enable her to find the horses and attendants which Vanozia had prepared for her flight.

“ And now,” said Vanozia, when all was ready, “ a few hours will place you beyond danger ;—and then, whither will you go ? ”

“ To Florence,” said Melanthe ; and the deep blush which dyed her cheek again brought comfort to the heart of Vanozia, for she thought of Lorenzo de’ Medici, and of his recent visit to Rome. Not

having questioned Melanthe as to the object of her affection, she naturally concluded, from the readiness of her answer, that Lorenzo was the person.

Joy is sometimes selfish as well as grief. In the delight of finding that the inclination of Melanthe so fully seconded her own desires, Vanozia forgot to inquire further into the future plans or hopes of Melanthe; and having agreed with her as to an appointed plan of communication, which the acquaintance of Vanozia with the localities of Florence enabled her to form, she led her from the room, and taking a key from her girdle she opened a panel in the wall leading to a private staircase. They descended in safety; and after many turnings and windings in the dark, a short flight of steps brought them to a grated door. In another moment Melanthe had parted from her friend, and Vanozia, in breathless haste, regained the apartment she had quitted, and endeavoured to compose herself, ere she should return to the banquet, where she had left Borgia, surrounded by his dissolute companions.

It was a dreadful life—and wretched indeed was

the fate of poor Vanozia ; but her wretchedness had not yet reached its height, and dark were the days that were in store for her, when the three children of whom she was the doating mother, should vie with each other in the commission of crimes so appalling, that even the black deeds of their father paled before the horrible vices of his offspring.

CHAPTER V.

ALTHOUGH trembling with fear and haste, and with scarcely sufficient light to guide her on her way, Melanthe could not forbear pausing to look back upon the house she had just quitted. The outline of a high wall was all she could distinguish. In vain did she endeavour to trace some form of tower or gateway, by which she imagined she might recognise the spot where she stood; one dark mass stood before her, and as she turned again to pursue her lonely way, the faint gleam of the white road alone served to show her that the path she followed was that which had been described by Vanozia.

A small wood was the place of concealment, where she expected to find the attendants and horses, but the gloom appeared to increase every instant: and soon it became impossible for her to distinguish any distant object.

Unappalled by a circumstance which would have struck terror to the heart of many, Melanthe continued steadily to advance, actually groping her way with outstretched arms, until the tediousness of such a progress made the distance appear double what she had been taught to expect. Still, such was the confidence with which the earnestness and truth of Vanozia had inspired her, that not for a moment did she doubt or hesitate, and was soon rewarded for her courage by the sound of voices. She prudently paused to listen ; but the stamping of the horses upon the hard ground betokened their impatience, and Melanthe, hastily drawing near, exclaimed, as she had been desired by Vanozia,

“ Nicolo, are the horses ready ?”

“ Yes, Signora, they have been so for more than two hours,” was the ready answer.

“ And Giannetta ?” inquired Melanthe.

“ She is ready mounted, behind yon thicket,” replied Nicolo, as he struck some sparks from a flint, and lighted a small lamp ; but Melanthe, secure from all mistake, begged him to extinguish the light, and having, by his assistance, mounted

her horse, proceeded with her companions across the Campana.

For many hours they pursued their journey almost in silence, Melanthe only inquiring from time to time the distance they had gained, and whether, amidst the darkness, Nicolo was sure of his road. But the answers she received soon quieted all fear upon the subject. The path seemed as familiar to Nicolo by night as by day; and it was with a gesture of pride, which provoked smile from Melanthe, that, as a faint gleam lighted up the East, he pointed to the outline of a dense wood, which he had frequently mentioned during the darkness as a fitting resting place. Beneath the shade of its trees the travellers remained for some hours; and then, mounting their horses, continued their journey. A few hours ride brought them to the small town of Civita Castellana, where, in a house situated in one of the most obscure streets, they sought shelter for the night.

Here they were detained for many days by the severe illness of Melanthe. The violent excitement

she had lately undergone, added to the exertion of a hurried journey, brought on a fever, by which she was so much weakened, that, when at length she recovered, it became obvious to Nicolo, who felt himself responsible for her safety, that it would be utterly impossible for her to proceed upon her journey with the same rapidity as at first. The injunctions of Vanozia, and the immense bribe by which she had secured the services and promised silence of himself and Giannetta, had impressed upon the mind of Nicolo a vast idea of the importance of his charge; and during the illness of Melanthe he had scarcely absented himself for a moment from the dwelling she inhabited.

It was not, therefore, without considerable alarm that he perceived that, both by night and day, a solitary figure hovered within sight, yet without ever approaching sufficiently near the house for him to distinguish more than the large cloak and riding hat which was constantly worn by travellers of all descriptions. But to discover the station or business of the stranger formed no part of the intentions of Nicolo. His orders were

to protect Melanthe from danger, and to conduct her whithersoever she might wish to go ; and as he had already been informed by her that Florence was the place of her destination, he required no further directions, and prepared to set out the moment she should be sufficiently recovered.

It was, however, more than a fortnight ere the travellers again pursued their journey ; and the patience of Nicolo was almost exhausted by repeated disappointments, for the strength of Melanthe seemed to fluctuate without any apparent reason, and more than once she had been obliged to return to her bed upon the very day named for their departure. At length they quitted the town, and Nicolo could scarcely refrain from a look of exultation as he led his charge safely through the gates, and saw at a little distance the same shrouded figure, evidently intent upon watching their movements.

The terrible anxiety which secretly preyed upon Melanthe, had rendered delay almost insupportable. All her hopes rested upon the thought of reaching Florence. Once there, she would find no difficulty

in discovering Montesecco ! and should the intelligence which she expected to receive from Vanozia respecting the liberation of Elphenor, not prove as satisfactory as her words had led her to hope, Melanthe determined to appeal to the promised friendship of Lorenzo de' Medici, and entreat his interference with the Pope in behalf of her father. Uninformed of the events that had occurred during her seclusion, she little thought that she was flying for protection to one whom the Pope now regarded as a bitter enemy. Happy in her ignorance of the impending tragedy, Melanthe journeyed on, recalling to mind the many noble traits she had admired in the character of Lorenzo, and building upon the faith she had experienced of his lofty nature a certainty of generous forgiveness for her rejection of his love, and a comforting anticipation of succour.

Far different were her reflections as her mind turned to the Cardinal ; and she pictured to herself his rage upon the discovery of her evasion. The veil had now fallen from her eyes. The appearance of the beautiful and unhappy Vanozia, whose sorrow and degradation had brought forcibly before

her the picture of her own fate, had fear or weakness induced her to listen to Borgia, proved to Melanthe that the step she had now taken was the only one in which she could hope for safety. The horrible character of him from whom she fled, stood out in all its naked deformity ; and as she recollected the interview which had taken place between them in the convent of the Speranza, she shuddered to think that the same delusion of a false and impossible marriage, had already effected the misery of a being so naturally innocent as Vanozia appeared to be. Thankful to have escaped a danger so fearful and dark, Melanthe once more felt the revival of hope in her bosom, and counted the hours which must elapse before she should reach Florence ; but her strength did not keep pace with her impatience. Two days riding had only brought the travellers to the foot of the mountains. The ascent must be tedious, and Nicolo strongly endeavoured to persuade Melanthe to take a day's rest before she attempted a ride so fatiguing to one in her weak state : but she would not be controlled ; and assuring her conductors that her sufferings

would only be increased by delay, she at once determined to proceed, hoping to reach before nightfall, a small inn of which Nicolo had spoken, and which was only a few miles distant.

The beautiful scenery of the Appenines was new to Melanthe, and as she rode forward, she forgot her fatigue in the delight she experienced at the splendid views which opened before her. They had soon reached a point from which she could look back upon the vast expanse of country which she had traversed. Before her, were the defiles of the mountains; and above her head, in all the majesty of their grandeur, towered forests of pine and oak, from the masses of which stood out the moss-grown crags of gigantic though picturesque forms. Struck by the enchanting beauty of the spot, Melanthe had reined up her horse, and stood for a short time inquiring from the attentive and intelligent Nicolo the names of the principal points of view, when, just as she turned her horse's head to proceed, a sharp whistle caused the animal to start. Nicolo sprung to her side; but scarcely had he seized her rein, when another whistle from below was answered from either side, and in an instant a

score of armed men rushed from the thickets, and the travellers were surrounded.

“The Brigands! Mercy — Mercy,” screamed Giannetta, as she endeavoured to force her horse forwards, or backwards, or any way in which he might contrive to extricate her from the ferocious looking band by which they were encircled; but all was vain. Whichever way she turned, a dagger was raised before her eyes; and it soon became obvious to her, although bewildered by terror, that her best course was to follow the example of Melanthe, and quietly to submit, where resistance was useless.

As to Nicolo, he was rapidly exhausting his store of invectives and imprecations upon those around, who, in the first onset, without giving him time to draw his knife, had pinioned him so effectually that he sat upon his horse in the most ludicrously helpless manner. The fears of Giannetta almost gave way to laughter as she beheld him; but very soon, all other feelings were merged in grief for the lamentation which broke forth from Melanthe, as she perceived the intention of her captors to separate her from her attendants.

Hitherto, the demeanour of the brigands had been marked by the most gentle deference towards her, several having stood passively round, while one only laid his hand upon her rein : but the instant she attempted to offer any resistance, the scene changed ; and, on a sign from their chief, four men sprung forward, and seizing the bridle, forced the horse of Melanthe to advance rapidly in an opposite direction from that in which she had been travelling ; while, as she turned a despairing glance towards her companions in misfortune, she perceived that they also were compelled to quit their road, and take a side path which appeared to lead up the mountain. Even in that moment of terror, when breathless with excitement from the suddenness of the attack, Melanthe found time to envy the destination of all not forced to follow the same road as herself ; for, in answer to her repeated entreaties that they would tell her to what part of the world they were thus so forcibly hurrying her, the man, who appeared to act as chief of the party, had pointed forwards, and uttered the single word “ Rome ! ”

CHAPTER VI.

THE sickness of despair fell upon the heart of Melanthe, as the idea of returning to the spot polluted by the presence of the Cardinal entered her mind. The hope which had sustained her during her flight died away, as she contemplated the certain danger and difficulty which would attend her restoration to the power of her enemy. So convinced was she now of the almost miraculous influence exercised by Borgia, that she felt that once again within the walls of Rome, escape would be impossible. And she trembled, and shrunk, at the thought of the solitary house and the warnings of Vanozia, till, from the future, she turned her thoughts to the present.

So absorbing had been the anticipation of her fate, that she had scarcely observed the conduct of those who had thus suddenly become its arbiters. She found herself closely surrounded by twelve

armed men, whose picturesque costume led her to suppose that they were the Brigands of whom she had heard so much, but who seldom ventured near enough to the city to be recognised. He, who seemed the chief in command, was in no way distinguished by his dress from his companions; and Melanthe, gathering from some expressions which escaped him, as she endeavoured to draw him into conversation, that they only formed part of a body, gazed anxiously round, in the hope of discovering, in any change of position, some chance of escape.

They had quitted the road by which she had ascended the mountain; and although still advancing in the direction of Rome, she perceived that they had turned considerably to the right, and had entered a narrow defile overhung by a dense wood. The object of their route soon became apparent, for after little more than an hour's riding, the same shrill whistle she had heard at the moment of her capture was repeated, and in an instant afterwards several bandits sprung from their cover, and the little party was surrounded. All eyes were rivetted on their captive; but the demeanour of the

brigands was so different from that which she had often heard ascribed to them, that Melanthe, filled with wonder, forgot her fears; and as she beheld the inquisitive, but yet not disrespectful glances cast upon her by the dark browed desperadoes around, and listened to the deferential language of him whom she now easily recognised as their Captain, as he assured her that she should be treated with all the care and courtesy which was in their power to bestow, felt as though some secret talisman had suddenly been entrusted to her, by which these wild spirits of the mountain had been soothed into an unnatural calm

Although relieved from immediate fear, a sense of helplessness fell upon her, as she thought of her isolated position, and she faltered forth a petition, that the company of her faithful attendants, Nicolo and Giannetta, might be granted to her.

“Lady, it is impossible,” was the only answer she could extract from the Captain, who had replaced the inferior officer, and now walked by her bridle rein.

“I will reward you for it. See, I have the means,” said Melanthe, as, bending forward, she

displayed for an instant to the eyes of the Captain the magnificent pearls which Vanozia had clasped round her neck. The brigand turned a hasty glance upon the jewels, yet only shook his head, and Melanthe replaced the pearls within her dress. Quick as had been the movement, it had not passed unobserved; but the presence of their Captain restrained the men to a strict attention to their duty, and the party continued to move onwards.

“Tell me, at least, whither you are leading me,” said Melanthe aloud, hoping to attract the attention of some of those by whom she was guarded.

“Lady, we are forbidden to answer questions,” said the man who had at first conducted her; but his words were uttered in a low voice, as if afraid that he might be overheard by his Chief.

“But must it be to Rome?” asked Melanthe, in a tone of distress.

The word caught the ear of the Captain, who, turning fiercely round, exclaimed, casting a threatening look upon his followers, “Who spoke of Rome? *Corpo di Christo*, can ye not listen to a woman’s questions, and be silent? Let the first who speaks look to his head; and you, Lady,” he added,

endeavouring to soften his tone, "be advised, and submit quietly. Fate is stronger than will; and the power of the Pope is stronger than either."

With these ambiguous words, and a gesture which very expressively declined further conversation, the Captain strode forward, dragging, rather than leading, the jaded horse of Melanthe. It was almost dark, when she perceived that they were about to cross a shallow rapid mountain stream, which bounded and dashed amongst huge fragments of fallen rock that obstructed its course. They passed it in safety; then, having scrambled for upwards of a mile, along a steep road on the opposite side, the Captain paused, and giving a few brief directions to his men, lifted Melanthe from her saddle, and conducted her to what appeared to her in the fading light to be the mouth of a cavern. It was situated in a mass of rock, overhanging the precipice on one side, while the other opened to the mountain, which was thickly wooded; and the top of the cave was rendered inaccessible by projecting masses of granite, amongst which grew some large straggling oak, concealing the approach from all but a practised eye.

“ Not there—for pity sake, not there !” she exclaimed, as all the horrors of murder and violence, of which she had heard, rushed to her mind. “ Let me remain in the open air.”

A look of contempt at a request which appeared to him so childish, was all the answer the brigand chief vouchsafed; still it was with no ungentle hand that he led her forwards; and pushing aside the boughs which hung from the rock, he entered the cave, and threw some brushwood upon the glowing embers. A bright flame instantly lighted up the interior, and, with some appearance of courtesy, the Captain placed a stool by the fire, and entreated Melanthe to be seated. A moment after, steps were heard approaching, and an old woman entered; but at the first glance, her hideous aspect so terrified Melanthe, that she turned away her head, and before she could again gather courage to look round, the Brigand Chief was gone. A murmur rung in her ears of threats, and oaths, and fierce wrangling; but her bewildered senses had not enabled her to collect the import of what she had heard; and to address any inquiry to the withered and savage looking creature who had been

summoned to attend upon her, promised to Melanthe little more chance of a satisfactory explanation than if she had breathed her prayers to the rocks above and around her.

It seemed, however, no part of the design of the strange power into which she had fallen to treat her with harshness or disrespect ; for her new guardian, who informed Melanthe that her name was Teresina, was, in her rude way, attentive and even courteous towards her, and brought food and wine, and offered to remove the heavy cloak in which she was still shrouded. This, Melanthe peremptorily declined. The jewels which she wore were one inducement to do so ; but the secret hope that, by some means, she might contrive to escape from the vigilance of her captors, determined her to be ever ready and watchful ; and when, after vain endeavours to extract from her companion some intelligence which might enable her to guess as to what her fate was to be, Melanthe, worn out by weakness and fatigue, was forced to seek repose, she folded and clasped her riding dress closely around her, and lay down upon the pallet which had been prepared for her.

When she awoke, the morning light streamed in from the natural door-way, formed by the rock, and the first object which met her eyes, was the form of Teresina, extended upon the ground, close by her side. She was fast asleep. A natural impulse to escape, although she knew not where to go, urged Melanthe to make the attempt. She raised herself cautiously from her bed, and stole past the sleeper with the tread of a fairy. In an instant she stood before the door; but the heavy grating with which it was secured, resisted her utmost endeavours to move it; and then she marvelled how she could have imagined that a spot so exposed to probable danger as was the stronghold of the brigands should be left unguarded. Not only was the door firmly fastened, but a thick chain, apparently fixed in the roof, was passed diagonally through rings rivetted to the grating, and a huge padlock secured the whole to another iron ring, embedded in the foot of the rock. She turned away with a feeling of hopelessness, and grown accustomed to the light of the cavern, examined its various recesses, which had hitherto escaped her observation. All was in order,—an order which

but augmented her fears, for it spoke the haunt of a well-trained and organized band. The niches, which apparently had been hollowed from the rocky walls, were filled with articles telling the trade of their owners—swords, matchlocks, and poniards, were there in abundance, and stores of ammunition were piled by their side; while, on the top of a large wooden chest, Melanthe discovered dresses of all kinds, even of a costly description :—caps, with feathers, and tassels of gold, and masks and visors, sufficient to accomplish the disguise of the whole troop to which they belonged.

Further on, were bridles, saddles, and horse armour, and innumerable boxes, casks, stores of salted provisions, and kitchen utensils of all descriptions. Every thing seemed to have been remembered that was or might be requisite for the maintenance of many persons; and the smoke-dried appearance of the walls and roof proved that the existence of this robber-hold was of no recent date.

It scarcely needed to look on aught beside the female guardian of the cavern, to tell Melanthe the nature of the spot where she stood; and, with a shudder of disgust, she examined the features,

rendered still more gaunt and withered by the blue light of the coming day. And yet a trace of grand though masculine beauty might still be detected, as a calm, now unnatural from habit, softened the fierceness of the lines, with which long indulgence in every passion disgraceful to her sex, had stamped the face of the sleeper. She was one, who in early days had been the delight, but was now almost the terror of the wild troop, who seldom owned law, save that of their own mad will. Her long grisly hair was bound up somewhat fantastically with a handkerchief of scarlet cloth, and displayed a brow and form of head of bold and classical outline. Though the eyes were closed, an air of reckless defiance sat upon her face; and Melanthe shuddered on beholding her grasp convulsively the long clasp knife which she had evidently placed by her side before retiring to rest. The movement seemed so habitual, that the poor girl felt faint with terror, as she thought of having passed the night with such a companion; and creeping gently past her, she seated herself close to the door, and endeavoured to examine the prospect without; but the light was scarcely strong enough to admit of

her doing so. Wistfully she gazed through the iron bars, yet she thought even less of her own fate than the distress and danger it might entail upon those so dear to her ; and the tears that stole down her cheeks, were chiefly called forth by recollections of the only prison which she had ever before visited.

Alas ! what were the bars against which she leaned, compared to those behind which her wretched father, for years, had groaned. Would the door ever open to restore him to the light of day, or had she found him but to part for ever ? These thoughts weighed heavily on her spirit ; yet, amidst the gloom which oppressed her still struggled a gleam, without whose vivifying ray she felt she must have sunk. It was her love for Montesecco, and the confidence she reposed in his affection. All other hopes might fade—all other support might waver or might fail—that thought, and that trust was unshaken—that beacon star still shone to cheer her on her rugged way. Sooner or later, he would be released from the ties which now bound him, and at liberty to seek her out, he would obtain the freedom of her father, then claim her as his

reward. Till then, through danger and through grief, she would endure on—patient and firm, in the blessed certainty that the heart she prized above all treasures of the earth held communion with her own, and with the spirit of love watched over her even from afar.

CHAPTER VII.

SOMEWHAT soothed by the current of her reflections, Melanthe sat for a little time in perfect stillness behind her prison door, looking out calmly upon the scene before her, as each moment some new object started into life beneath the gleam of the coming day. The door of the cavern was shaded from without by the fern and lichens springing from the crevices of the rock ; but it was so arranged, that, through the branches of a straggling oak which flung itself from above, a distinct view could be obtained of the only side upon which the hiding-place of the brigands could be approached. A small space had been cleared at a little distance, and the freshness of its verdure gave it the appearance of a lawn in the midst of the forest.

Melanthe remembered that the path by which

she had reached her present abode skirted this opening, and naturally her eye reverted continually to the spot connected in her mind with a chance of escape, however difficult or remote. She examined every tree, and every branch, in the hope of recognising some that might enable her to trace the intricate windings of the road ; but the mass of foliage was so dense that she could not succeed. As the light increased, she fancied more than once that a figure flitted about on the margin of the wood, and her heart beat quickly as she made the discovery ; yet it was with fear, for, encaged as she was, and probably closely surrounded by the whole of the gang into whose power she had fallen, what chance could there be of succour or escape ? The appearance of mystery is generally an excitement, and Melanthe soon found herself watching with intense interest for the re-appearance of the form she had, or at least imagined she had seen.

But nothing came again—not a leaf of the lower branches stirred, and she began to think she must have been deceived, when a movement of one of the lichens, which hung like creepers from the rock above, caused her to look up, and through the

grating she saw the eyes of a human being glaring down upon her. The lower part of the face was completely muffled, the slouched hat concealed the hair and forehead so that nothing was visible save two dark piercing eyes ; and Melanthe, without knowing why, trembled from head to foot, and springing from her place, aroused Teresina by a cry of fear which echoed through the cave.

“ How now ? ” she exclaimed, “ what is the matter ? Are the soldiers upon us ? ”—and shaking off the hold of Melanthe, the woman raised the clasp knife she held in her hand, and sprung from her sleeping posture with an agility which her years would seem to have forbidden.

“ Look there,” said Melanthe, pointing to the rock, without lifting her own eyes to the spot.

“ Where ? what ? ” asked the woman, at the same time feeling in her girdle for the key of the padlock, which to her satisfaction she found was still in its usual place.

“ What did you see ? ” again she asked, in surprise.

“ I don’t know—a man, I believe,” said Melanthe.

“ A man ! ” echoed the woman ; “ only a man ! ”

and she laughed with a ferocious wildness that frightened her captive still more.

“ And may I ask what else the Signora expected to see in these mountains ? ” she added ; and the reasonableness of the question struck Melanthe, who blushed at the almost childish terror she had shown. The woman, who appeared to have very little curiosity upon the subject, looked once through the grating, and, not perceiving any one, proceeded to make some arrangements in the interior of the cave ; and having lighted a fire, she spread some food upon a table, then unlocking the door, seemed disposed to go out ; but Melanthe observing the movement sprung to her side, exclaiming,

“ Do not leave me here—alone—have pity on me ! ”

“ Pity,” echoed Teresina with a stare, as if she did not comprehend the word.

“ Yes—listen to my prayer,—help me to escape, and I will make you rich for life.”

“ Have you gold ? ” said the woman, whose eyes sparkled at the word ; and, as she spoke, she looked cautiously round, and then approached her captive.

“ Yes ! yes ! ” replied Melanthe. “ And you shall have it all, if you will only let me go. See here,” and she raised the long sleeve of her robe, and showed the glittering bracelet she wore ; “ you shall have this also—you will be so rich—only leave the chain unfastened—I ask no more. I will hide in the woods, until - - - ”

“ Poor child ! ” said the woman, apparently touched by the earnest manner of Melanthe, “ they would hunt you like dogs - - - but the gold ? ”

“ Here, take it,” said Melanthe ; and she drew forth her purse, and poured its contents into the lap of the avaricious old woman, whose fingers trembled as she clutched each piece separately, and examined it.

“ Gold—golden ducats ! Five—ten—twenty—thirty. Santa Maria, never did I behold such a sum ! Madre di Dio ! to think of all the gold of the nobles, and that we must drudge and slave for a pittance of black bread to keep us from starving.” And she looked at Melanthe with an air of malevolence that words could not have expressed.

“ It is yours—all yours,” said the poor girl, endeavouring by gentleness to soften her gaoler.

“ Take it, and I will pray to the Holy Saints to guard you—only allow me to quit this place.”

“ We might escape together to-night, in the darkness,” said the old woman musingly ; “ I know every turn of the forest ; but then, what should I do in the city or the plain ? I who so love the mountains—and even this cave—I have been here for forty years ! ” and with a selfishness common to age, she seemed to tremble at the idea of a change in long-established habits,—even while she groaned under the tyranny with which she was constantly treated by the ruder spirits of the gang.

“ You would have a cottage of your own—you would be happy—and blessed for the good action you have done,” suggested Melanthe.

“ A cottage—and a vineyard such as I have seen on the plain ? and wine—plenty of good wine—and no curses—no blows—nothing but eating and drinking—wine every day,” said the woman, with a wild fervour of delight that disgusted Melanthe.

“ Would you not be glad to leave this dreadful life ? ” she urged timidly.

“ Dreadful,” echoed the woman with an offended air; “ it is a noble life, a grand life—one not to be exchanged for the Pope’s kingdom; but,” she added, coming closer to Melanthe, and grinding her teeth with a look of concentrated rage, “ that is for the chiefs. They take all—all; and I their servant—their slave—am left to starve. Yes, often I have had nothing for days to eat, but the acorns from the forest; and when they come back, the devils in hell cannot torture more fiercely if they find not food and wine, and it pleases them to say I had all when they left me. Look here—and here,” and putting aside her dress she showed the marks of what appeared to be deep wounds on different parts of her body. “ You think these were blows—they are the marks of hot irons, of the burning coals they held me down upon, to make me own what I had done with the wine they had left here the last time they went; but I had drank it. Ha! ha! ha! It was a glorious week—morning, noon, and night, drunk—drunk—drunk, till I scarce could tell the night from the day!” and Teresina rubbed her hands delightedly.

“ Horrible!” said Melanthe.

“ Yes, horrible !” repeated the woman ; “ nothing but blows and kicks, and usage not fit for a dog ; but I have sworn to be revenged, and if we go I will tell you what I will do. I will lay a train, and blow all their treasures about their ears,” and she grinned with delight at the idea.

“ Do not talk of vengeance,” said Melanthe soothingly, “ leave vengeance to Heaven !”

“ Heaven ! now hear how she talks ! as if Heaven would trouble itself about such a poor miserable wretch as I am.”

“ May God forgive her !” said Melanthe, horrified at the impious words.

“ No,” continued the woman ; “ other folks may trust to such means, but I will revenge myself ; and when I am gone, let them say what they will—and do what they will with anything of mine they can find ; they may roast in the fire all that belongs to Teresina—they may - - -” but here, as if seized by some horrible convulsion, she stopped, stretched out her clenched hands, while every feature was contracted with an expression of agony that froze the heart of Melanthe.

For some moments a deep short sob was all

that betokened existence in the stricken frame; and, breathless with anxiety, Melanthe continued to watch for the return of the blood to the sunken cheek and livid lips of the old woman. At length the muscles seemed to relax from their rigidity, a gleam of consciousness shown in the fixed and glassy eyes, and slowly drawing up her arms as though shivering from cold, Teresina crossed her dark withered hands upon her breast.

“My son,” she said, in a low hoarse whisper, “my son—I had forgotten. If I go, they will think it is to betray them—they will torture him—put out his eyes as they did to the Jew last week—tear his flesh with pincers, and strip the skin from his arms, till it hangs from his fingers like ribbands. I saw them do it—I heated the irons, and I laughed when they hissed in the blood. Some one else will laugh when his blood hisses, and bubbles, and smokes on the hot steel. My son, my Giulio, my one—one blessing, I cannot go. No! no! no! Lady, take back the gold—My son, my son!” and raising her voice till it rung in a shrill scream through the cavern, she dashed the purse at the feet of Melanthe, and with the

fury of a maniac swung back the heavy grating, and securing it from the outside with the chain, which she locked, she hurried from the cave.

The voice of Nature had triumphed. The one feeling of the woman had trampled the demon spirit to the earth, but with it the last hope of Melanthe lay crushed ! The sudden revulsion of feeling occasioned by disappointment is, of all the painful emotions incidental to the human state, one of the most difficult to endure. The effort of a great sacrifice will, to nobler minds, impart some feeling of satisfaction in compensation for the hard self-denial exacted ; and resignation will soften an anticipated sorrow, until it loses much of its poignancy ; but the suddenness of an unlooked for disappointment overwhelms and stuns the sanguine spirit. At once the bright flowers of hope are laid low, as the blossoms of the meadow fall beneath the scythe, and, like them, they seem cut off for ever.

So elated had Melanthe felt by the manner with which Teresina had at first received the proposal of flight, that it was not for some time that she could believe in the meaning of the frenzied words

uttered by the unhappy woman just before her disappearance. But one by one they came back upon the ear of the captive. She looked around. She was alone; and going to the door of the cavern, she saw the chain, and tried the lock; it was fast; and Melanthe gazed at the waving woods, beneath which she had hoped that night to find a shelter—then turned to her prison—to weep!

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL that day Melanthe remained alone ; and when evening brought back Teresina to her post, the unhappy prisoner saw at a glance that an air of dogged resolution had replaced the fierceness which at their first meeting had struck her as the characteristic expression of the countenance of her gaoler. Certain of repulse, she forbore to implore further ; and Teresina, perhaps touched by the gentleness of her captive, refrained from all allusion to the scene of the morning. Little was heard in that dark cavern, save the low sobs of the poor girl ; and when night came, she lay down upon her pallet, more to avoid the vigilance of Teresina, than from any hope of obtaining repose. Apparently satisfied with the submission of her prisoner, Teresina soon followed her example ; but before she did so, Melanthe remarked that she drank long and deeply of some liquid, which she took from a small cask

which stood in the interior of the cave. Disgusted by the sight, Melanthe turned her head away, and soon the heavy breathing of the old woman told that she slept.

But to the weary eyelids of the captive, sleep came not ; and, to relieve the tedium of the hours, she left her pallet, and placing a stool close to the grating, sat down, and sorrowfully gazed through her prison bars upon the moonlight scene. The angle of the rock at one side, threw the entrance to the cavern into deep shade ; beyond, all was distinctly visible, and so still was the night, that the murmur of the mountain stream, which she knew was at a great distance below, fell clearly upon her ear. Vain would it be to tell the desolation of heart which froze up every faculty, as the poor captive sat thus encaged by a ruffian band in their mountain stronghold, scarcely daring to conjecture what might be her future fate, and yet dreading to look back lest the shadow of past grief might lengthen as she looked. Thus benumbed as it were by sorrow, she sat for some hours, when she was suddenly aroused by the sound of whispering voices. It ceased ; and remembering the unnecessary display

of fear which had been caused that morning by what she now considered a delusion, she abstained from awakening Teresina, and remained in her former position. The sound returned. The speakers had evidently approached close to the angle of the rock ; she could see their shadows as they stood ; and the first words they uttered took from Melanthe all power to move.

“ I tell thee, Carlo,” said one of them, “ it must be done to-night. To-morrow, the Captain will return, and then farewell to any chance for us.”

“ He cannot be here by to-morrow,” was the reply. “ You talk as if he had nothing to do but to walk straight to the Pope’s palace, and claim the reward offered for the capture of a runaway nun and a heretic. You forget, there is a price set upon his own head ; and to treat through a third person, requires time.”

“ Others might want it, but he will do without it ; and a free pardon is promised to all who may have a hand in bringing her back.”

“ After all, she may not be the person,” observed Carlo, who appeared more inclined to procrastinate than suited the views of his companion.

“She is no other, or my name is not Tomaso,” said the first speaker angrily. “Have I not, from the hour when the proclamation of the Pope, signed by the Cardinal Borgia, was distributed all over the country, traced her very steps, till she must needs fall sick at Civita Castellana, and lose me the reward by letting the Captain get hold of the news. But it’s always the way,” he added, in a sulky tone, “we work—and the chiefs profit by it: I should like to know what becomes of their oath to share all alike—we hear little enough of that after we have once joined the troop.”

“Poor Tomaso!” said Carlo laughing; “but I have a plan to make you rich for life.”

“What is it?” growled Tomaso, whose anger rose in proportion as his companion seemed inclined to hold back from the accomplishment of the scheme which had brought them thither.

“Give me the damsel, and do you take all the jewels which you say she wears.”

“Not I, by Heaven!” said Tomaso, fiercely. “I may have been deceived in the pearls, but not in the girl; and, nun or not, she is a splendid creature. No, my good Signor Carlo, a bargain

is a bargain—the woman and her jewels are our joint property.”

A groan that appeared to come from the rock against which they leaned, made the robbers start, but it was not repeated; and Carlo, upon whom the charms of Melanthe had made a very vivid impression, continued,

“ You had better take my offer; renounce the girl, or I fling over the precipice the file I had brought to open the lock; and I don’t think you will persuade Teresina to unfasten the door.”

“ Fling it, then, and yourself after it,” roared Tomaso; “ but, by God and the saints, you shall keep to the bargain.”

“ Devil! thou art not fit even to look at her,” exclaimed Carlo, in a voice of rage.

“ And you,” said Tomaso, sneeringly, as he snapped his fingers in the face of his companion. The sound of a sharp blow was the answer, and in an instant the robbers were engaged in a deadly struggle.

Melanthe, starting with a loud cry from her seat, clung to the bars of her prison, as she beheld the fierce encounter of the ruffians; but her shriek was

unheard by those whose fury could alone be appeased by blood. With frantic energy each pressed upon the other, twining, in a death grapple, the arms of his opponent, striving who should first draw the knife from his belt. For a few moments the deadly struggle was not unequal, when Tomaso, who had the advantage in stature, having gained a slight elevation of ground, by a desperate effort released his arms from the grasp of his adversary, and rushing upon him with wild fury, hurled him with one tremendous blow upon the ground. He fell upon the sharp rock almost at the mouth of the cavern; and such was the violence of the shock, that his forehead was completely crushed by it. One instant the quivering limbs struggled to regain their position—the next, all was still; and Tomaso, with a glare of satisfied vengeance, stood gazing on the corpse.

Melanthe saw it all, and, sick with horror, was still clinging to the prison door, incapable of speech or motion. The body of the murdered man was within a few paces of her, and she could see in the bright moonlight the blood welling from the wound. Tomaso saw it also, but with far

different eyes. It might betray the deed ; and the laws of the brigands were severe in case of murder amongst their band. Something must be done, and that instantly. He took up the body in his arms—the warm body of his former friend and comrade ; but steeled to all compunction, by a long life of violence and blood, the ferocious spirit of Tomaso did not quail, as the still pliant limbs of his victim now hung helplessly towards the earth. He only sought to shield his garments from the red stream which burst afresh as he lifted the corpse. And now he stands upon the edge of the precipice—he looks cautiously from the dizzy height, then moves forward a few steps, as though to gain a better footing ; he pauses—his burden glides from his arms, and the weak branches of the underwood crash beneath the falling weight—and then a dead, sullen sound. To-morrow, who shall say how came that mangled corpse upon the path below ?

There was a fearful silence. Still leaning from the edge of the rock, the murderer seemed listening to the second death of his victim, while his eye followed the movement of the tall fern and the branches, as they settled to their former places,

springing, one by one, from the sudden bend they had received.

And Melanthe saw this also ! But is it a vision of her reeling brain—or has Heaven already sent a ghastly phantom to dog the murderer's steps? No !—It is a human form—a form of flesh and blood, and sinew, that glides, spirit-like, across the blood-stained grass ; yet with a tread so noiseless the murderer does not turn his head. His soul is in the depth below—he is looking on his crime, and does not see the hand Heaven guides above his guilty head. One blow - - - the tottering feet have passed the edge—they slip upon the smooth and polished rock ; again the crash is heard—but dies, for up the mountain's side there rung a shriek so bitter, and so wild, that even the eagles started from their nests, joining their dismal scream to that deep death-note from below, until a general wail, echoing from rock to rock, fled madly up the valley, as though the demons, howling from their hell, welcomed a kindred soul.

CHAPTER IX.

AT the first movement of the stranger, as he raised his hand above the head of the murderer, the fate of Tomaso was so inevitably sealed, that, unable to bear the accumulated horror of the scene, the senses of Melanthe forsook her, and she fell fainting upon the floor. When she recovered, many hours must have passed; for the glorious sunlight streamed through the grating, and the glad song of the birds resounded from the woods. She, herself, was lying upon her pallet, and Teresina was busy preparing some article of food near the fire. It was so like the day before, that Melanthe at first felt convinced that the hideous scene which rose before her eyes must have passed in a dream. Soon, however, it all came back to her mind—so horrible in its distinctness, that a relapse into insensibility would have been hailed

by her as a relief. She could not speak—she dared not move, for it seemed as if a step might bring her to the brink of that fearful precipice.

Teresina, whose own mind was too gloomy and fierce to allow of her bestowing much sympathy upon her companion, merely recounted, in a few words, how she had found her stretched upon the ground, and had lifted her to her bed ; then, without further inquiry or remark, she placed upon a table the food she had been preparing, and quitted the cave. Long, long did Melanthe watch that day, listening, with a beating heart, to every sound ; for she thought that the murder must be discovered, and she trembled, as though her having witnessed the deed was already known to the wild crew, who might, perhaps, implicate her in the death of their companions. She knew not the extreme indifference with which the members of the gang regarded each other. Formed, as it was, of individuals driven to enrol themselves in it either by accident or fear, and differing generally in their habits and calling, but little friendship existed amongst them, although their common danger maintained the semblance of a common interest. Tomaso and Carlo, the two

whose death she had witnessed, were the oldest of the gang ; and had ever been supposed to be closely united. Of their friendship, she had seen the strength ; of the rest, she could only form a conjecture ; but that conjecture was full of terror. However, for the moment, her fears were not realized. The day passed on, and she sat unmolested in her prison ; and when evening brought the return of Teresina, the altered countenance of the old woman did not speak of bloodshed or murder.

“ Lady,” she exclaimed, “ what will you give me, if I let you breathe the fresh air of the mountain for half an hour ?”

“ This,” replied Melanthe, taking from her purse a piece of gold.

“ Well then,” said Teresina, as she eagerly grasped it, “ come with me—but you must promise not to stir from my side.”

“ I will promise it,” replied Melanthe.

“ Remember, I have not ill-used you, nor taken your jewels, which the Holy Madonna knows I might easily have done ; but Teresina is honourable—ay, honourable as any noble lady in Italy ;” and she drew herself up with an air of stateliness,

much at variance with her rags and her dirt. Melanthe said nothing, for she saw that the woman had been drinking.

“ The Captain said my head was to answer for your’s; and so remember, if you hear his whistle up the hill side, you must come in here directly ;” said Teresina. Then, without waiting for an answer, she went on :—“ This is the feast of Saint Antonio of Padua, the blessed Saint Antonio ! we must keep it merrily.”

“ Where are we going ?” asked Melanthe, whose heart beat with joy at the prospect even of a momentary release.

“ Just round the rock ; no further. There are only a few of us here—the rest are gone down to the plain, on the track of some noble’s carriage : but we have done better—we have caught a peasant with a cargo of wine, and we must drink to the health of Saint Antonio. Oh, the blessed Saint Antonio ! - - -” and taking as many of some large earthen cups from a chest as she could conveniently carry, Teresina led the way, keeping, however, a close watch upon the movements of her captive.

The heart of Melanthe sickened, as she passed

the spot that had witnessed the dark deed of the night. Teresina marked it not; and turning the angle of the rock, they passed the shade of some large trees, and Melanthe found herself in the midst of a scene totally unexpected. A bright fire blazed in the centre of an open space in the wood, and around it sat, or rather lounged, all those of the gang who had been ordered to remain to keep guard over the prisoner in the cave. They were watching the process by which, in honour of the blessed Saint Antonio, a young wild boar was to be roasted whole; and while waiting for their repast, regaled themselves plentifully with the wine they had taken from the peasant, who, with the small horse, whose panniers were now nearly empty, stood at a little distance, beneath the shade of a tree.

Melanthe, as she heard the boisterous mirth of the party, stepped back still further into the concealment of the wood, and her presence was unnoticed by the brigands. If, before, she had indulged in a momentary hope of escape, it vanished as she beheld the determination with which Teresina kept close by her side. Not an instant did she with-

draw her vigilance from her charge ; and had it not been for the kindness of the poor plundered peasant, who, when the feast began, seemed to act as cup-bearer to the party, Teresina would have had little reason to rejoice in the festivities held in honour of the blessed St. Antonio di Padua ! So occupied were the brigands with their feast, that the movements of their attendant were unobserved by them ; and cutting a savoury piece of the well-roasted pork, he brought it to the spot where Teresina sat on the grass by the side of Melanthe, placing at the same time a cup and flask of the wine upon the ground. The food was unheeded, but the wine cup in an instant was at the lips of the beldame, who took a draught that would have put to shame the most reckless of the band.

“ Drink,” she said to the unhappy girl beside her, and at the same time presenting her with the cup which she replenished. Melanthe, judging that opposition would only irritate a person in the state of Teresina, put her lips to the wine, and feigned to obey a command at which she shuddered. Apparently satisfied, Teresina emptied the cup at a draught ; then refilling it continued to drink,

until, oppressed by a drowsiness unusual to her, she lay back upon the bank ; still, however, keeping a fold of the dress of Melanthe grasped in her hand.

At length, it was evident that the senses of the woman were gone—was it hope or fear that shot through the breast of the captive as she made the discovery ? Melanthe knew not ; but one instant and her uncertainty was converted into joy so overwhelming, that she pressed her hand upon her lips to stifle the cry which must otherwise have broke forth. The eyes of Teresina were no sooner closed, than, with the speed of light, the peasant from whom the wine had been taken sprung to the side of Melanthe, and raising the hat which covered his features, displayed to her view the countenance of Gennaro !

No time was there for greeting, or surprise. Disengaging the dress of Melanthe from the grasp of Teresina, they stole softly to the spot where the horse was tied. Gennaro cast one look upon the scene, before he lifted Melanthe to the saddle. The wine, which he had drugged, had done its work, and round the still blazing fire lay the stupified revellers. One glance was enough ; and away they

hurried over rock and valley until they reached a spot where another horse stood ready ; and taking an opposite direction from the side by which Melanthe had gained the mountain, they soon left behind them the haunts of the brigands ; and, though not without difficulty, ere the morning dawned, were on the road to Florence.

CHAPTER X.

THE prison of the Inquisition was situated almost in the centre of the city of Rome. Surrounded by walls of an immense height and thickness, not even the tops of the few chimneys could be seen from without ; and had any adventurer, hardy enough to risk the attempt, gained the summit of the walls, his temerity would have been ill rewarded by the discovery that all within was alike mysterious and unapproachable. As though to veil from the face of Heaven the horrors enacted within that den of iniquity, the whole of the buildings were covered with one flat roof, extending nearly to the outward walls. Many windows were in this roof, which admitted the light to the actual covering of the apartments below, all of which were so constructed, that a constant watch could be kept upon those who

occupied the cells, without the unhappy prisoners being aware of the fact.

The building underneath the upper roof was divided into two parts, or long rows of cells, the space left between being paved with stone, forming a sort of covered street, in the midst of which were wells which supplied the water for the use of the prison.

When any prisoner was admitted, he was compelled to walk blindfold for a considerable time between two of the officials, who led him backwards and forwards, and round and round the building, until it was impossible for him to recognise the side by which he had entered. After this, he was consigned to his appointed dungeon. Many of these were totally dark, and not unfrequently the new occupant of the cell stumbled, on entering, over the bones of his predecessor ! This, however, had latterly been avoided ; and a gleam of light and hope administered to the unhappy victims, less from humanity than to arrest the ebb of reason ; for the double terror of solitude and darkness so often produced insanity, that the cruelty of the

tormentors had been thereby in some degree disappointed.

It might have been a fortnight after Melanthe had quitted the city of Rome, that two persons sat together in this prison. They occupied a small apartment, the walls and ceiling of which were covered with crimson cloth, all the other arrangements of the room speaking equally of luxury and comfort. The elder of the two, by his sleek and comely aspect, showed that the monkish habit which he wore had not entailed sufficient acts of penance or mortification to have at all impaired the redundancy of health with which nature had blessed him ; still less would the jovial expression of his countenance, and tranquillity of his broad brow, displayed more fully by his closely shaven crown, have led the casual beholder to suppose, as he looked upon him, that he stood in the presence of one of the most rigorous officers of the Inquisition. Yet such was the state and calling of the individual, who, in his well-cushioned and carpeted room, endeavoured by sundry anecdotes connected with his profession, to beguile the time until

admittance to the secret chamber could be granted to him and to his companion the Cardinal Borgia.

It was indeed Roderigo Borgia who sat by the blazing hearth; but not now did his handsome features glow with the gay and courtly air which had been their wont. Sullen and fierce was the brow upon which the dancing flame of the wood fire played; and although seated in the most luxurious arm-chair, with his feet resting upon a cushion, it was with an air of irrepressible impatience that he turned to his companion, as he exclaimed,

“Is it possible, Diego, that the chamber is not yet vacant?”

“It ought to be by this time,” replied the Inquisitor; “the Turk was on the coals when I last looked in.”

“How long do they last after the fire question?” asked Borgia, more with the air of a man who seeks a momentary distraction, than one touched by any feeling of humanity.

“Seldom more than a few minutes,” replied Diego; “but those Eastern dogs have a tenacity

of life beyond belief. However, as both his eyes were out, I should not think his brain can stand the fire long. I will just look in, and say that your Eminence is in a hurry.

“Do, good Diego! and in the mean time let me have some wine. The room is warm, and I have ridden fast.”

Diego immediately opened a cupboard, and producing a flask and cups, placed them on a small table by the side of the Cardinal, who, filling one of them, drank off its contents at a draught.

“Good wine, by Saint Peter,” he exclaimed, as he refilled the goblet; “and a comfortable chamber for the Palace of torture, methinks;” he added, glancing with a smile round the apartment, which was known in the prison by the name of “*the Red Room*,” being the only one, the walls of which were not hung with black.

“Your Eminence is merry,” replied the Inquisitor; “but we want some little comfort, for the service is hard.”

“Hard!” echoed the Cardinal, while a smile again passed over his face, as he looked upon his rosy and well-fed companion.

“ But, my good Diego, you said you would look into the next room—do bid them leave the Turk, and go on with the next prisoner.” These words were uttered in a gentle tone, for the services of the Inquisitors were of too much importance to the Holy See, to risk offending any member of the secret tribunal.

“ Certainly, if it so please your Eminence,” replied Diego with readiness, moving towards the door as he spoke. Just then, a shriek so terrible and prolonged broke upon the ear, that the Cardinal started, and turned uneasily in his chair ; but Diego merely retreated from the door which was still unopened, and laying his hand upon the crimson-covered wall, observed, in an apologetic tone, “ The stuffing must have given way somewhere ;” and he pressed his fingers repeatedly against the side of the room, which Borgia perceived, in order to deaden any sound from without, was entirely lined with cushions.

“ It’s of no use going in just yet,” said Diego, coming close to the lamp which stood upon the table, and taking from his pocket a long piece of paper.

“ Ah ! I see—‘ Julia Wersenstein, a German heretic, follower of John Huss, aged sixteen ;’ they have only just begun with her, for the prisoners never scream so loud after the first few minutes. She wont last long ; I saw her this morning, and by mistake she had been put in the dead cell, and had had no food for a week ! Hassan stands next on the list, so I must pray your Eminence will have patience, and take another cup of wine ;” and Diego quietly restored to his pocket the paper, upon which was inscribed the names of the unhappy victims, with their supposed offences, and the order in which they were to suffer.

“ So you really think he knows nothing about the girl, or the manner of her escape ?” inquired Borgia, as, filling a cup of wine, he presented it to the Inquisitor, at the same time settling himself for a comfortable conversation before the fire.

“ To the best of my judgment, he is quite ignorant of every thing,” replied Diego, with an air of sagacity, at the same time crossing his short fat legs, and sipping his wine.

“ You have only told him that she was missed

just before his return to Rome," inquired the Cardinal.

"That is all," answered Diego; "your Eminence so commanded."

"Requested, my good Diego!" replied Borgia in his most courteous manner. "The officers of the Inquisition are supreme in their jurisdiction. But should he really be ignorant of the place of her concealment, would it not be better to set him at liberty? He can be watched night and day, and it is probable she will at least try to communicate with him."

"A most wise suggestion," observed Diego obsequiously.

"Still Hassan has declared himself a merchant from Smyrna—an Eastern—and no doubt an Infidel; and the great mind of your Eminence cannot follow the turnings and windings of these Greek and Moslem dogs—they would outface his Holiness the Pope—ay, even the blessed Saints of Heaven, did it suit their purpose. No, there is nothing for them but the rack, and even that sometimes fails."

“ This Hassan,” said Borgia thoughtfully, “ is a man of great note in the city—his death might be inquired into ; whereas, if he really has nothing to communicate, his detention and examination can be easily explained away as matters of state policy, for this girl is described as a heretic and runaway nun.”

“ In this case,” observed Diego, who saw that some uneasiness, mingled with the hatred of the Cardinal against Hassan, “ what might your Eminence think of a middle course ?”

“ How mean you ?” asked Borgia.

“ Sometimes I have known fear operate as powerfully as pain. Suppose that another prisoner be put to the torture in his presence, might not the threat of a similar fate extort the secret from Hassan ?”

“ Well imagined,” replied the Cardinal ; “ but is there any prisoner already condemned ?—Time presses.”

“ Oh !” replied Diego, “ we can manage such a trifle as that, if it should be required for the service of your Eminence ;” and he pulled out the paper a

second time from his pocket, and ran his eye hastily over it. "I fear we have nothing very good,—
'Two boys, thirteen and fourteen; one woman sickly, and deformed; three old men, all near eighty.' These are of no use; they would not last half-an-hour. Ah! here is the very thing. 'Nathan Myers, Jew, suspected of concealing immense hordes of gold, and accused of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, aged forty-five:—this will do. I remember him well, though it is some weeks now since he was brought in—a fine handsome man. He will be a grand subject;" and the Inquisitor raised his eyes delightedly from the list, and fixed them upon the face of the Cardinal, as if awaiting his instructions.

"I think we cannot do better," was the answer of Borgia to the inquiring glance of his companion; and Diego put the paper once more into his pocket, saying as he did so, "Then, if your Eminence will excuse my absence, I will have the prisoner brought up directly. That German girl must be dead by this! - - -" and he bustled out of the apartment, while the Cardinal re-settled himself in his com-

fortable chair, and drew the skirts of his robe somewhat more over his knees, to protect them from the heat of the fire.

The horrible indifference with which the Inquisitor spoke of torture and of death in no wise affected Borgia. His stern and powerful mind, accustomed to look only upon the one point, the accomplishment of the object he had in view, disdained to turn aside. Human life was to him a consideration far too trivial in its nature to arrest him in his course; and although the Papal chair, the object of his ultimate ambition, stood ever before his eyes as an incentive to caution, if not to mercy, it was seldom that any pause in his headlong career was the result of forbearance. Already stained by crimes of the deepest dye, the terror of his name was to him a safeguard: but, in the case of Hassan, his usual determination had, in some degree, deserted him; and having caused him to be seized and incarcerated within the walls of the Inquisition, with the intention of extracting, by torture, the secret of the escape of Melanthe, it was with no small degree of satisfaction that he listened to the suggestion of the Inquisitor as to a milder

form of treatment. It was not altogether the sensation which the death of Hassan might occasion, which caused the resolute Borgia to waver. Baffled by the artifices of Vanozia, he had hitherto been unable to trace the steps of Melanthe; and so irritated was his passion, that he did not dare to sever with his own hand the only tie by which he might yet recover possession of all that he had lost.

It was contrary to the laws of the fiendish tribunal to which he had appealed, to allow any eye, save that of the initiated, to look upon the agony of their victims; but a power like that of Borgia, could make as well as unmake laws; and even should the tongue of Hassan ever reveal the terrible secrets of that prison-house, its demoniacal masters could still boldly confront inquiry, for whatever might be the real motives for their persecution of individuals, heresy was the accusation with which it was too closely veiled to be easily discovered. For this reason, when driven to distraction by the sudden disappearance of Melanthe, the Cardinal had adopted the plan of issuing a proclamation of reward or pardon to any who might restore her to his power; he had not hesitated to describe

her as a heretic ; thus enlisting bigotry where avarice might have failed. For some time, even this measure had proved unsuccessful ; and rendered frantic by the delay, he had caused the unhappy Hassan to be seized the very day, when, within a short distance of Rome, he was returning from his wanderings in search of Elphenor.

CHAPTER XI.

THE return of Diego put an end to the reverie into which the Cardinal had unconsciously fallen ; and, rising from his chair, he prepared to follow his conductor to the chamber, where the prisoners always underwent a mock examination, even when their persecutors had previously decided upon their fate ! The first care of the Inquisitor was to render the disguise of Borgia as effectual as that worn by the officials of the prison. A long black robe, descending to the ground, concealed the figure, the face being covered by a black mask ; and a large silk hood and cape, the border of which was ornamented with skulls and bones, painted in white upon the black cloth, was closely tied over the head. Gloves of black silk were not omitted ; but Diego reminded the Cardinal that the habit of their order was to keep their hands as constantly

as possible beneath the folds of their dress, lest any peculiar movement might betray to the prisoner a knowledge of his accuser. It seemed to the Cardinal that in a place from whence so few ever returned to tell the tale of what they had seen, a precaution so strict was scarcely necessary : but the rules of the order prescribed every care in its members ; and in this instance Borgia did not regret a regulation, which might prevent his encountering the calm, yet searching glance of Hassan.

Fully equipped as an Inquisitor, the Cardinal followed Diego to the secret chamber. For a moment, the change from the well-lighted apartment he had just quitted prevented his seeing clearly ; but as his eye grew accustomed to the shadow, he glanced round to take a survey of the room. It was of a circular form, the ceiling and walls being hung with black cloth. At some height from the floor was suspended a large iron lamp, which threw its rays strongly upon the panels into which the surface of the walls was divided, and which represented either skeletons of the most appalling dimensions, or the figures of

men undergoing different stages of the torture, and which were portrayed with frightful distinctness by the same painting of white upon the black ground. That one lamp, glaring upon images so horrible, was the only light in the room, except that which was emitted from a small square lantern, darkened on three sides, the fourth was kept constantly turned upon the face of the prisoner under examination, whoever he might be; and as the Cardinal entered, he almost started on beholding the long snowy hair and beard of Hassan. For an instant one softer thought crossed the mind of Borgia, as the image of Melanthe rose before him; but the first words spoken by the official who occupied the chief place at the table, awoke the dormant rage within the breast of the Cardinal.

“ You are here,” said the Inquisitor, addressing the prisoner, “ to answer for the escape of a heretic from the hands of justice. Will you, of your own free will, disclose the secret of her abode, or must the torture extract it from your lips ?”

The low deep tone in which these words were slowly uttered died away in silence, for the prisoner made no reply, but with a calm, scrutinizing glance

turned his eye from one to another of the shrouded figures before him, covered from head to foot, as though they dared not meet the light that might have told that yet they bore a human semblance.

“Speak!” said the Inquisitor, “or the rack awaits you.”

“Fools!” exclaimed the prisoner, as, with an undaunted air, he raised himself to his full height, and looked haughtily around, “Idiots that ye are—ye who pretend to know the secrets of the heart. My child! my only treasure, is lost; and ye speak to me of torture! My beauteous one is stolen from her home, accused—tracked by bloodhounds like yourselves, and you threaten me with the rack, and with the flame. You have said that she is lost! Here! take my limbs! tear them asunder! work your bloody will—the torture of Hassan is past.”

“Prisoner,” said the Inquisitor sternly, “your violence will avail you nothing. Answer, know you the abode of Melanthe?”

Hassan remained silent; but the watchful eye of Borgia perceived, as the beloved name of his

adopted child sounded in that awful chamber, the breast of the old man heave, and his fixed gaze grow glassy from the unshed tear forced back by his proud enduring heart. And the Cardinal, well versed in human nature, saw that the ignorance of Hassan was not feigned. Still it was possible ; and he resolved to omit nothing which might elicit the truth. Touching the arm of Diego, Borgia whispered something in his ear, which apparently was repeated by the Inquisitor to him whose duty it was to examine the prisoner, for the same voice again addressed Hassan :—

“ The young Greek who lives with you is also missing from your house.”

“ Gennaro ! ” exclaimed the prisoner, thrown off his guard by this unexpected announcement.

“ Answer,” said the Inquisitor, “ but dare not to question—where is Gennaro ? ”

“ Where should he be ? where ? but with her ! ” exclaimed Hassan wildly. “ Oh, my God ! ” he continued, as he sank upon his knees, “ I thank Thee, my child is safe ! ” and the tears, which grief could not draw forth, now poured down the old man’s cheeks ; and his deep sobs showed how

the long-pent-up anguish had melted at the touch of joy, for his heart told him that, guarded by Gennaro, Melanthe was comparatively safe.

His emotion was unnoticed by his fiendish judges, and in a few moments his attention was again called to the present by the voice of the Inquisitor, who said to him, as another prisoner was led into the room,—“If you have concealed aught, your doom shall be as that of yonder blaspheming Jew; yet the sacred tribunal of the Inquisitor is merciful—time will be given you to consider. Look on; but, on peril of your life, speak not.”

The new victim offered a strong contrast in appearance to him who had so narrowly escaped. The Jew, whose riches were the real object of the Inquisitors, was a man in the prime of life, and of striking beauty of person. Tall, strong, and undaunted, he eyed his persecutors with an air of ineffable disdain; and apparently his fine and powerful appearance raised some slight degree of uneasiness in the breasts of his judges, for one of them, on a sign from the superior disappeared, and returned with a reinforcement of two officials,

making their number amount to six, without including the Cardinal or Hassan. The first act of the new comers was to bind the arms of the latter closely behind him, thereby preventing any chance of succour to the unhappy prisoner, even should Hassan have been inclined to offer it. A short examination then followed, in which the Jew stoutly denied the sin of blasphemy, and as resolutely refused to render up to the secret tribunal the riches of which he was possessed, and which it was known he had placed in security.

The sentence of death by torture was then pronounced upon him, the judge pausing in the midst, to point out the leniency of the secret and merciful tribunal of the Inquisition, which allowed to the prisoner the opportunity of confession during any period of his punishment. This over, the Chief Inquisitor laid his hand upon a particular corner of the table, and immediately the sullen clang of a loud though muffled bell was heard. It tolled as if for one already dead ; and, as the dismal sound rung slowly on the ear, the panels of the apartment opposite to the spot where the prisoner stood, gradually withdrew from each other, and a bright

light streamed into the room, disclosing the mysteries of the one adjoining. Four men, whose masks and close-fitting garments of red marked them as executioners, stood by the wheel, which, with all its horrible apparatus, was distinctly seen. The men, who held in their hands thongs of leather, while their sleeves were tucked up above the elbow, as if in token of their trade, advanced to the sliding door of the room, where the Inquisitors still stood in dread array. A long and deep silence was broken by the same harsh tones that had been heard before.

“Confess!” said the Inquisitor, as he marked the eye of the prisoner wandering over the horrible instruments displayed to his gaze.

“Never!” replied the Jew firmly.

“Confess!” repeated the Inquisitor, after a few moments of silence.

“Never!” again exclaimed the Jew. “Never shall my tongue condemn to beggary my children, and my wife! It is my gold you want. Ha! ha! ha! Devils! do your worst. Nathan, the blaspheming Jew, despises, and spits upon you!”

The signal was given ere the words had passed

his lips, and the frenzied laugh of defiance almost mingled with the shriek which the first moments of agony forced from the victim. Firmly bound to the chair, his arms and legs were fixed and compressed so as to force the blood to the extremities ; and long needles placed under the nails were driven in with hammers until concealed in the flesh. This was continued until the prisoner fainted ; upon his recovery, the same questions were put to him, but without success.

Finding their efforts ineffectual, the Inquisitors desisted from their examination, and the second torture was ordered. The prisoner being placed in the middle of the room, his hands were bound behind his back. A rope was passed through the thongs, and then drawn crossways through a pulley fixed to the ceiling of the room. The blood of Hassan froze in his veins, as he perceived two of the executioners take hold of each end of the rope, which, being of considerable length, depended to the ground, and with a simultaneous movement, prepare to raise their victim to the ceiling. As the Jew felt the strain upon his arms, by a violent effort he contrived so to straighten them, that his

whole weight rested on his hands, and he reached, unhurt, the giddy height of the pulley. But this could not baffle the murderous skill of his tormentors. With a sudden jerk, they slackened the ropes, and checking them as the form of the prisoner was within a few feet of the ground, the shoulders turned in their sockets, rising above the head, and the wretched man dangled to and fro, suspended by his now powerless hands ! In this position, he was again urged to confess, and upon his refusal, the executioners continued to pull the rope alternately, and with such violence, that the head and body of the prisoner struck the stone walls, which soon were smeared with blood. The groans that broke from the poor victim showed how terrible was the anguish he endured ; at length making a sign to the executioners to pause, the ropes were lowered, and the Chief Inquisitor approached. The crushed and mutilated form of the unhappy Jew awoke no pity in the breasts of these monsters of bigotry, and it seemed almost a mockery as the official placed his hand upon the pulse, as the dislocated arms lay extended far above the head of the prisoner, who had sunk upon the ground. That

life still remained, was evident, from the exhortation with which the hypocrite strove to convince the Jew of the enormity of his offence, and persuade him to buy his peace from Heaven by the sacrifice of his treasures to the Holy Church.

“Never ! never !” faintly whispered the prisoner, whose voice was stifled by his groans, while the blood which streamed from his ears and mouth rendered the spectacle still more appalling. One by one the Inquisitors now approached, each endeavouring, by the most bitter taunts, to extort the secret for which they panted. But all was useless. The prisoner could not, or would not speak ; and uttering vehement curses upon his obstinacy, the Inquisitors gave the sign to proceed.

Once again the mangled wretch was raised by his hands ; but the joints no longer crackled, for the bones of both arms were broken. As soon as he hung midway in the air, two of the executioners turning a small handle, fixed in each side of the wall, the floor in the centre of the apartment slowly opened, and a large black cistern, filled with water, was seen. In an instant, a heavy plunge and the slackening of the ropes told for what purpose

it had been provided ; and the executioners advancing to the edge, just prevented the drowning wretch from sinking beneath the surface, while the Inquisitor continued to urge him to confession. Perhaps it was the extreme pain of his broken and disjointed limbs—perhaps it was the desire of a death more speedy than he had dared to expect ; but after the first struggles which the suddenness of the transition as well as fear had provoked, the violence of the prisoner subsided, and he lay a helpless weight in the hands of his tormentors.

Their purpose thus partially defeated, the executioners received an order to desist. The Jew was withdrawn from the water, and the yawning chasm in the floor was closed. The hands of the prisoner being unbound, his arms were straightened by his side, and he was laid upon the ground, where, after a cordial had been administered to him, he was suffered to remain for some time, in order to recover sufficient strength for that which he had yet to undergo. His eyes were closed, and he breathed with difficulty ; but the mute agony of his wan countenance, and his mangled limbs, from which the blood continued to flow, made no change in the

intentions of the incarnate fiends who surrounded him.

A door in the side of the room was opened, and a shriek broke from the lips of Hassan, as he beheld the preparations for the fire question. A monstrous grate, filled with the glowing embers of charcoal, stood by the side of an inclined plane, or couch, of small iron bars, across which a sort of cradle to confine each limb was placed. This was what was called the Live Torture, the hollow beneath the bars being filled with live coals; but on the other side of the room the means of a slower process were visible, in the form of a raised bed of brick work, beneath which glowed the light of several small furnaces, any one of which might be extinguished at pleasure, thus inflicting only a partial torture, as the occasion required.

It was not to either of these that the present victim was destined; and Hassan, as he marked the movements of the executioners, beheld a third mode, which, if more slow, might be productive of still greater agony. From beneath the high grate which contained the charcoal, and which was about three feet from the ground, a huge iron tray upon wheels

was slowly rolled forth ; and the chains which hung from either side of it showed the destination to which the executioners were about to consign the dying man.

Hassan looked at the dropping coals and the fearful glare which must almost instantly roast the flesh upon the bones of whoever was placed beneath that grate, and his sense of helplessness gave way before the accumulated terrors of the scene. Springing forwards with a scream, which startled the bystanders by its horror, he threw himself suddenly between the fire and the two men who were about to place their victim beneath it, imploring at the same time, that a speedier death might in mercy be dealt to the prisoner. The frantic energy of the old man suspended for a moment the movements of the executioners, and the words he had uttered reached the ear of the already expiring victim. With an effort of strength, almost superhuman, he freed himself from the grasp of those who held him, raised himself upon his feet, and rushing forward with the wild fury of despair, dashed his head against the stone wall, and fell dead upon the spot !

A long silence followed this act of desperation, till one of the executioners, trembling perhaps lest some blame might be imputed to him for his neglect, observed, in a low tone, "He could not have lasted five minutes,—he had been too long in the swing."

"It is thy accursed interference that has thus robbed the church of her rights. The sacred tribunal shall award thee thy deserts." These words were addressed in a menacing tone to Hassan by the Chief Inquisitor; but before any one could reply, a hurried knocking was heard at the door of the outer room. Immediately the entrance to the fire chamber was closed upon the dead body of the Jew and the executioners, the Inquisitors retiring with Hassan and the Cardinal into the outer room. The door was opened by Diego, and having received a sealed packet from the officer without, a whisper passed between two of the Inquisitors, who beckoned the chief to follow them.

"The fugitive is discovered—taken in her flight across the mountains," were the first words uttered by Borgia; and in a tone of triumph, which showed how deep was the interest of the news to him,

“His Holiness,” he continued, “makes it a personal request that the prisoner Hassan, having taken the usual oaths of secrecy, may be restored to freedom, and offers a purse of gold to such as have been instrumental to his capture.”

The Inquisitors bowed low at this announcement, for they were well aware that the Pope, as well as the Cardinal, would pay largely for their services. The mention of the Pope’s name was but a feint on the side of Borgia, for the letter he held in his hand was in fact an offer of treaty from the Brigand chief, into whose power Melanthe had fallen. A few words of courtesy and explanation followed; and the Cardinal prepared to throw off his disguise, and to quit the prison, whose terrors could no longer further his designs.

“Your Eminence will surely drink another cup of that good wine, and supper must be ready by this time,” whispered Diego, as they quitted the secret chamber. The Cardinal assented; and, without appearing to give a thought to any thing he had witnessed, calmly turned with his companion from the horrors of the torture to the luxurious comforts of “the Red Room.”

CHAPTER XII.

FROM the hour when, at the instigation of Luca Pitti, the Pope had selected a field for the services of Montesecco, at a distance from Rome, the same power had been constantly exerted to prevent the return of the Condottiere to the city. The insubordination of the many small dependencies and fortified castles, situated upon the borders of the Roman territory, in some degree gave colour to the pretext of keeping him with his troops encamped in the neighbourhood of the insurgents. But the success of his arms could not reconcile Montesecco to this petty warfare. His spirit began to chafe, and he panted for some enterprise more worthy of achievement.

Before many months had passed, his desire was gratified—an insurrection of a serious nature broke out at Perugia. The imposition of a trifling tax

upon bread was magnified into an attack upon the rights of the people. They rose in a mass, demolishing in their fury the stores of grain, and threatening destruction to the city. By a forced march, ere the second day had closed, the forces of the Pope, under the command of Montesecco, appeared before their walls; but the redoubted name of the Condottiere could not calm the spirit of rebellion which had arisen. The insurgents closed their gates against the troops of the Pope, and the affrighted magistrates, with some of the principal citizens, took refuge in the citadel, where they were upon the point of perishing from thirst, when the gallant Condottiere, after a close siege of many days, forced his way into the city, and delivered them from their perilous situation. The rebels laid down their arms, but not before they had lost one half of their forces, while the besiegers found their numbers scarcely diminished.

This was a point in the art of warfare of peculiar importance to the Condottieri of that period, whose consequence mainly depended upon the numbers they could bring into the field, and one in which the genius of Montesecco shone pre-eminent. The

victory he had achieved was one of no small triumph; and it was with a heart beating with joy and pride that the young Condottiere dispatched a messenger with the news to Rome, adding, at the same time, a prayer that leave of absence might be granted, in order that he might, in person, lay the details of the campaign at the feet of his Holiness. The messenger departed, and, with an anxious heart, Montesecco awaited his return.

Latterly fortune appeared to have smiled upon him. A few days before the fall of Perugia, a letter from Luca Pitti had been conveyed to the Condottiere, retracting his opposition to the attachment of Montesecco to Melanthe, and permitting him, if he still so desired, to demand her in marriage. From that moment he seemed to tread on air. The gloom, which had so long oppressed him, vanished; and the extraordinary circumstance of his never having received any reply to the communications which he imagined must have reached her, was construed, by the buoyancy of his present mood, into an accident of very possible occurrence. He did not, or would not, recollect that not one of the many messengers he had dispatched, had ever

returned to give account of his mission. Faithful and secure in his own constancy and affection, he had steeled his heart against the admission of doubt, and awaited with trembling impatience the hour, when, released from his military duties, he might hasten to Rome, and claim the hand which he coveted beyond all earthly treasures. The days which must necessarily intervene before the return of his messenger, were passed by Montesecco in a state of restless anxiety, which, in vain, he endeavoured to control; and, in order to free himself from the irksome duties which a sojourn within the city would have entailed upon him, he caused his tent to be pitched without the walls, and in its retirement abandoned himself to delicious dreams of the future.

It was the tenth day since the officer charged with the dispatches, had set out for Rome, when, as Montesecco sat alone, the curtain, which shaded the entrance to his tent, was drawn aside, and Luca Pitti stood before him. With the delight of a child, the Condottiere sprung towards him; and seizing his hands, poured forth his thanks for the kindness of the letter he had received; with an

energy and rapidity of utterance which proved to Luca Pitti the depth of affection with which the young man regarded Melanthe. Again and again, did Montesecco call down blessings upon him for the consent which he had so generously given, and paint in glowing colours the joy which such an act would also convey to the bosom of Melanthe. But to all this passion of gratitude and happiness, Luca Pitti answered not a word.

“Speak,” cried Montesecco, “I entreat; tell me when I shall see her. What says his Holiness? Will he grant the leave of absence I have asked?”

“My son,” replied Luca Pitti, using the same term of affection as formerly, “we have far graver matters upon which to confer than love or marriage! There are many women in the world, and abundance of time to woo them.”

“To me there is but one,” began Montesecco, as his cheek flushed at the contemptuous manner of his companion; but Luca Pitti, with a forbidding motion of his hand, interrupted him, and observed,

“I know all that you would say; but I also have much to impart.”

“Is my leave granted?” impetuously asked

Montesecco, for his whole heart was full of Melanthe, and the desire of returning to Rome.

“It is,” replied Luca Pitti; “but the place of your destination is not Rome—you are appointed Ambassador of the Pope to the city of Florence.”

“How?” said Montesecco, in a tone of surprise, “Ambassador to Florence? The disagreements therefore between the Pope and Lorenzo - - -”

“Are forgotten,” interposed Luca Pitti quickly. “Each party has made some concession, and the most friendly relations are established between them; insomuch that the young Cardinal, Raffaele Riario, is appointed Legate, and is even now on his way to Florence in company with Jacopo Salviati, the Archbishop of Pisa.”

“The Archbishop, whom the Florentines refused to acknowledge, saying he was an enemy to their state—this is indeed wonderful,” exclaimed Montesecco, who was overwhelmed with astonishment at a communication so unexpected.

“Wonderful indeed,” replied Luca Pitti; “but the wisdom of the Holy See is manifest, and the friendly visit of these two great dignitaries of the church cannot fail of inspiring the Florentines

with feelings of confidence and affection. Your presence, as the Ambassador of his Holiness, will add much to the weight of so august a meeting."

"But not yet. Surely I may first return to Rome,—for only a day—for an hour," exclaimed Montesecco eagerly, as Luca Pitti shook his head gravely, and said,

"Do not think of it."

"Why not? speak, oh speak to me. Melanthe! oh! why should I not seek her?" said Montesecco, in a troubled voice.

"If you knew all," answered Luca Pitti; and his manner assumed a sternness, which froze the heart of his hearer, "you would not desire it."

"All - - -" exclaimed the young man, and for a few moments his agitation took from him the power of articulation: but recovering, he gasped forth, in a hoarse whisper, "Is she dead?" and as the words passed his lips, he sunk upon a seat, grasping, as he did so, the curtain of the tent for support, while he leant forward, fixing his eyes upon the face of Luca Pitti with an expression of wild terror that caused the latter to turn aside his glance.

“Not dead!” he exclaimed almost involuntarily, and then he paused, as if uncertain how to proceed; but the hysterical sob that broke from his listener recalled the startled senses of the designing villain.

“Not dead!” he repeated, “would that she had died before - - -”

“Before what?” cried Montesecco, with a vehemence that made Luca Pitti tremble. He stooped to the ear of his excited listener, and whispered a few words, as though it were even to his black soul the most fitting mode of utterance to a falsehood so heinous. A cry of such agony burst from the lips of the young man, that the cruel Luca Pitti was touched, and he gazed upon the large bright tears now falling rapidly from the eyes that, but a moment before, were radiant with the heart’s joy, until a feeling somewhat akin to compunction entered into his breast.

“Be comforted, my son!” he said kindly; but Montesecco did not appear to hear him.

“Dishonoured! false! Melanthe! - - -” he murmured, in tones of the most bitter sorrow. Then, as if all at once his thoughts had taken

another direction, he started to his feet, exclaiming,

“ I ask not, who is the man that hath done this—I would not hear his name until a sacred oath had passed my lips to tear his traitor heart from his breast. Hear me, just Heaven !” he continued, raising his clasped hands, while the frenzy of despair glared from his starting eyes—“ hear me swear that he who hath done a deed so foul shall know no rest, nor peace—by day—by night, by land or sea,—will I track his steps, until my howling curses ring in his ear ; no darkness shall hide him from my view,—no sanctuary shield him from my vengeance,—nor will I pause, even at the altar’s steps, until I drain the life-blood from his treacherous heart. This is my oath : now,” he added, with a calmness appalling in its despair, “ tell me his name.”

“ I will not tell you,” said Luca Pitti, whose subtle imagination had contrived a mode still more certain of entangling Montesecco in the net he had spread for him. “ I will not tell you, until you have convinced yourself that all I have advanced is true. I have said Melanthe had fled from Rome

before I left the city. Go thither, ascertain the fact, then meet me at Florence—the secret of her present abode will not be difficult to discover.”

“ Then there is hope,” said Montesecco, gathering comfort from the manner rather than from the words of Luca Pitti.

“ None ! but still I would have you convinced. Do as I have said—I will wait your coming at Florence.”

That evening, with a heart bursting with anguish, Montesecco set out for Rome ; and Luca Pitti, without uneasiness, saw him depart ; for he well knew that his inquiries would only meet with such answers as must confirm the tale invented merely for the base purpose of implanting in the bosom of Montesecco an implacable hatred against Lorenzo.

Of so great importance to the conspirators against the Medici was the co-operation of the Condottiere and his troops, that the crafty Luca Pitti had designed the only mode of enlisting him on their side. Jealousy, and hatred, and disappointed love, were the levers by which he intended to overcome the hitherto immoveable integrity and

honour of the young Condottiere. Thoroughly versed in the workings of the human heart, the one vulnerable point had been adroitly hit by Luca Pitti. The arrow was in the wound, there to rankle and fester, until endurance was exhausted.

To have declared to Montesecco, in the first outbreak of his despair, who was the rival who had thus hurled him from the summit of happiness, might have aroused suspicion; and Luca Pitti cunningly forbore to incur so great a risk. All had been so arranged by this adept in deceit, that the answers which Montesecco must receive in Rome, apparently from uninterested persons, would indelibly fix the shame and disappearance of Melanthe upon Lorenzo. Mariana, who alone was acquainted with the discovery of Elphenor, and the subsequent visit of Melanthe to the Cardinal, had been secretly removed to a distance, and her place supplied by one well tutored as to the intelligence she was to impart. All other sources of information had been studiously cut off; and Luca Pitti, satisfied that no precaution had been neglected, looked forward with confidence to seeing

the name of Montesecco enrolled in the already formidable list of conspirators ; and, in anticipation of the joyful event, he quitted Perugia a few hours after the departure of his victim, and, with a spirit considerably elated by the progress of his villainous scheme, took his way towards Florence.

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER many days of travelling, rendered doubly tedious to Melanthe by the state of weakness to which constant fear and agitation had reduced her, she entered Florence accompanied by Gennaro. Way worn and weary, she could only cast a hurried glance upon the splendour by which she was surrounded; but still a feeling of satisfaction thrilled through her breast, as she looked back at the beautiful amphitheatre of hills which rose between her and her persecutors.

Her first care was to seek out the person to whom Vanozia had directed her, and, after an infinity of trouble, she succeeded in discovering his abode; but it was only to encounter disappointment, for the man was unprepared to see her,—had not received any instructions from Rome, and was evidently perplexed by the questions addressed to him. Not less unsatisfactory was his answer to the inquiry of Melanthe as to where she might find a

lodging for the night. He certainly gave her two or three directions, but accompanied each with an assurance that he did not think there was a room or a bed in Florence that was not bespoken; for the Pope's Legate, and the new Archbishop of Pisa, with a host of knights, and nobles, and churchmen in their train, had just arrived, and great feasts and games were to be held in their honour, to witness which all the citizens of Florence had quitted their villas, and come to sojourn in the city.

This was not very encouraging; but Melanthe, thanking the man for his instructions, turned her horse in the direction recommended, and set out upon her search. For a long time it was fruitless; her informant had not exaggerated in his statement; for many of those to whom she addressed herself, assured her that they had given up their own apartments, so great was the number of strangers that had flocked to the city.

At length, however, chance accomplished that in which the best endeavours of Melanthe had failed. An old woman, happening to pass along the street, observed the disappointment visible in the countenance of the stranger, as she had applied, again

unsuccessfully, for admittance, and came up to her, assuring her that if she would be satisfied with humble lodgings, she might be accommodated at her house. Melanthe gladly accepted the proposal; and following Caterina, for so her conductress was named, was soon installed in a comfortable, though homely apartment; while Gennaro, whom Caterina instantly declared to be the brother of the beautiful Signora, was led to an adjoining room. Melanthe was not sorry when she observed the persuasion of the old woman as to the relationship of Gennaro; and although the evasion made the blood rush to her cheek, she felt that to insist upon revealing to a stranger the truth of the circumstances in which she was placed, would be an act of folly. Still, any concealment was painful to her frank and upright nature; and she continued to brood over it with feelings of regret and uneasiness.

Meanwhile, the unconscious object of her annoyance sat alone in his chamber, a prey to the most sorrowful emotions. The excitement of the last few weeks had been too great to permit his giving much thought to the future. The agony he had

endured upon the disappearance of Melanthe,—his ceaseless watching, first to ascertain her abode, and then to effect her escape, had strained his mind to a pitch which had prevented him from indulging in selfish considerations. No sooner, however, was the danger past than a re-action took place, and his grief returned. Once in Florence, he could no longer be to Melanthe that which he had been; while on their harassing journey, she had looked solely to him for support. She had already found a friend—she would find others, and poor Gennaro would be forgotten! Scarcely an hour had elapsed since they had entered the city, and yet, in the solitude of his chamber, Gennaro silently wept. He felt that he was separated from Melanthe; and the thought was so full of misery, that his young heart bowed beneath it. His love was so humble and true, that, from the hour in which he had become aware that any expression of it would be displeasing to its object, he had struggled to conceal the feeling which was fast wearing his life away. The fear of giving pain to her he loved, overcame the natural anxiety of an affectionate heart to paint the anguish it endured; and during the journey no brother's

love could have been more free from passion than that with which the poor dumb boy had watched over his charge.

Deeply touched by his gentleness and forbearance, Melanthe wept over the fatal affection she had so unconsciously inspired ; but prudently forbore, when in the presence of Gennaro, to show, by any increased coldness of manner, that she even suspected his secret. Thus somewhat of their former confidence had been restored ; and during the journey, the hours had passed to him in a delirium of joy. Happy to see her, to ride by her side, and tender her such little services as their position demanded, he thought not what was to be his future fate ;—could the present have endured, he would have asked no more. But once within the streets of Florence, his heart misgave him ; and the idea of Montesecco, of his own jealous fears, and of the preference of Melanthe for the stranger all rushed upon him. He remembered how often he had attempted in his mute way an inquiry respecting the Condottiere, and how constantly Melanthe had avoided the subject, which he felt sure was not from having misunderstood his mean-

ing, for from childhood they had had a language of their own, and their conversation was carried on by signs as rapidly almost as though they had spoken.

All this now came back to the mind of Gennaro, and the feeling of jealousy and anguish was so great, that he almost resolved, now that Melanthe was in safety, to return to Rome, and await the arrival of Hassan, in order to inform him of their late danger and escape. The impetuous nature of the young Greek had nearly urged him to resolve upon this step, when the entrance of Caterina, the woman to whom the house belonged, roused his attention. She made him a sign to descend, and soon the kind and gentle smile of Melanthe, as she beckoned him to sit by her side at supper, put to flight all other feelings, and he determined to remain at Florence.

A few days of repose were absolutely necessary, to restore to Melanthe her accustomed strength, and also to allow her to provide herself with such articles of dress as might enable her to appear in public; for as yet she wore the peasant's garb, in which she had escaped from Rome. Still the seclusion which she was forced to observe, did not

prevent her making constant inquiries of the person to whom she had been directed by Vanozia. No information had been received from Rome, and the fate of her father and of Hassan was therefore still uncertain.

This continued suspense soon became intolerable to her ; and Melanthe resolved that if another day passed without bringing the desired intelligence, she would overcome her scruples, and claim the support and protection which had been so generously offered to her by Lorenzo. While at a distance from Florence, she had easily determined to throw herself upon his friendship ; but now that the hour was come, she shrunk from the thought of appearing as a suppliant before the man whose affection she had rejected. The moment also of her arrival was singularly unpropitious for any private communication with Lorenzo :—surrounded by his illustrious guests, how could he withdraw himself from their society, and the duties of his station, in order to devote himself to the furtherance of her interests ? Perhaps he might have forgotten her—forgotten the promise he had made ; and the heart of Melanthe sunk as she

thought of her poor father, helpless in his dungeon, and watching, day after day, for the return of his child.

Many weeks had now elapsed since she had quitted Rome, many more might elapse ere a word of comfort would reach him, and in the mean time could she hesitate? As this idea arose, the timidity of Melanthe gave way, and she resolved to lose no time in endeavouring to see Lorenzo. This, to any person more versed in the usages of the world, especially in those of Florence, would have been a matter of little difficulty; for the ear of Lorenzo was at all times accessible; and many hours were daily set apart by him for the reception of those who claimed his services in their behalf. Ignorant of this, and magnifying to herself the difficulty and publicity of presenting herself to his notice, Melanthe heard with delight that on the following day a masque would be given by Lorenzo at his villa of Fiesole, to which the greater part of the citizens of Florence would be admitted.

The gay meeting was to be held in honour of the young Cardinal, Raffaele Riario, who had arrived with the Archbishop of Pisa, Francesco Salviati,

the dignitaries of the church not deeming it derogatory to their sacred character to be present at similar festivals; and Melanthe preferred entering with the crowd, and endeavouring to seize a favourable opportunity of discovering herself to Lorenzo, to making the demand of a formal interview. The kindness of her hostess soon procured to her the means of carrying her wishes into effect. All strangers, visitors to Florence, were included in the invitation of Lorenzo to the masque; and it was arranged that, under the escort of some relations of Caterina's, Melanthe and Gennaro should the next day proceed to Fiesole. As soon, however, as this arrangement was made known to Gennaro, his countenance fell, and he gave Melanthe to understand, by signs, that nothing should induce him to go. All her endeavours were vain to persuade him to accompany her,—he only shook his head, and sighed; and though, when the moment of her departure arrived, his eyes filled with tears, as he looked upon the preparations that were making, and beheld her put on the robe and mask she had selected, he remained inflexible, and Melanthe accompanied by her new friends departed for Fiesole.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE persons who had so kindly invited Melanthe to accompany them to the masque at Fiesole belonged to the middle class of life ; yet, by the wise regulations of Lorenzo, they were not upon that account excluded from a participation in the enjoyments of their superiors in station.

The whole body of the Florentine citizens engaged in commerce was divided into companies, or, as they were then called, *arts*. These comprised the greater and the lesser arts. The former consisted of those belonging to professions, or exercising the higher descriptions of commerce ; the latter were confined to trade and handicrafts. Of both of these classes the officers of the companies, and such individuals as were distinguished by influence and industry, were readily admitted to the assemblies of the nobles and chief citizens, an arrangement which materially contributed to the extreme

popularity enjoyed by Lorenzo de' Medici. The lively and impressionable people were charmed with the gaiety and magnificence of their young ruler ; and the announcement of any new festival, instead of exciting the feeling of discontent so natural to those excluded from such enjoyments as they might reasonably have hoped to share, was always received with enthusiasm by the whole population of Florence.

The villa of the Medici, near the beautiful hill of Fiesole, was the scene of many a courtly pageant. Nothing, which taste could devise or art accomplish, had been omitted to render the spot one of enchantment. The house had been built and furnished by Cosmo de' Medici in a style of regal magnificence, and was situated in the midst of pleasure grounds so extensive, that they gave to the rich vale, of which they formed a part, the appearance of one vast garden. Above rose the picturesque hill, the sides of which were festooned with vines, flinging their branches from tree to tree, as if in the very wantonness of luxuriance, the dark foliage of the elm and chestnut contrasting beautifully with the bright green fig and silver-leaved

olive, that trembled and whitened in the breeze. And as the eye turned to the plain, the surface of the gentle slope which led to it was broken by stately cedars, interspersed among the groves of forest trees, between which gleamed the soft verdure of the turf, enamelled with a profusion of beds of the choicest flowers, and watered by numerous streams, supplying fountains which filled the air with delicious coolness. From the nature of the ground, this water had been necessarily brought by means of aqueducts from a considerable distance ; but all was so perfectly contrived, that any appearance of formality was avoided, and those who loved to watch the course of the rippling stream, as it murmured through the dark chestnut woods that clothed the rear of the villa, little imagined how much labour and cost had been expended in order to produce so admirable an effect.

Two hours before sunset, Melanthe arrived at the gates of the villa. The scene of enchantment which opened before her was so novel in its kind, that she remained standing for a considerable time upon the mound, which, crowned by a lofty cedar,

was the point of attraction to all such as preferred the part of spectator to that of joining in the gaiety of the throng. The whole of the vast garden, interspersed with woods, which for a considerable distance extended over the plain below, was covered with groupes of masquers. The dazzling effect produced by the variety of colours in their gay dresses lighted up by the glories of an Italian sun, at first prevented Melanthe from distinguishing the characters assumed; and on an invitation from her companions she descended from the eminence where she had placed herself, in order to take a nearer view of the different arrangements of a festival, the renown of which eclipsed all that were attempted in imitation of it.

There were many in that gay crowd, who, like Melanthe and her companions, had adopted the disguise of the short mask and flowing robe of coloured silk, less with a view to concealment than to avoid the appearance of having retained their ordinary dress, the effect of which would have in some degree marred the brilliancy of the pageant in which they had been called to bear a part. These were, however, generally the more staid part

of the community, and formed a very insignificant portion of the gay and splendour-loving people who thronged the scene.

As Melanthe moved on, she was struck by the extreme order which seemed self-preserved in so numerous an assemblage. The Florentine people, accustomed to mingle in the brilliant festivals and masques given by the rulers of their rich and magnificent republic, entered at once into the spirit of the scene. Secure of their reception, and confident in the liberality and generous profusion of their entertainers, each citizen seemed to feel an individual responsibility for the success of the pageant in which he was by courtesy an actor. There was no hurry—no pushing, or scrambling for places or precedence—all was gay, harmonious, and courtly ; and so much care had been bestowed, not only upon the costumes and accessories of those who had chosen to adopt either historical or mythological subjects, but also upon the localities most conducive to the good effect of their first appearance, that each group seemed to occupy, as if by magic, the exact spot appropriate to its character.

The classic spirit of the age, as well as the

individual taste of Lorenzo, was traceable throughout, and with a most happy effect, in not only elevating the mind by higher associations, but in preventing the monotony always incidental to gorgeousness when allowed to predominate over the airiness of fancy, or the simplicity of good taste.

In imitation of the ancients, many of the masquers had adopted the garb of different Schools; and among the long-robed and bearded sages who, beneath the wide-spreading oaks overhanging the stream, seemed, as they walked to and fro, to revive the disputations of the *Academos*, the companions of Melanthe pointed out to her notice some of the most eminent scholars and artists of the day.

Passing this grave assembly, Melanthe gained the end of the wood, when her ear caught the sound of music, and in another moment she found herself in front of a light and graceful temple, standing on a slight eminence above the stream. A beautiful boy, whose hyacinthine curls hung to his shoulders, was singing to a golden lyre; and round the rock, upon which sat this youthful representative of Apollo, were appropriately grouped

nine of the fairest flowers of Florence, each lovely enough to have made the bosom of the gentle Muse she personated heave with envy of mortal charms. Gladly would Melanthe have paused to examine more closely faces so bright and beautiful ; but her companions hurried her forward, and turning to the shade of a grove, the nymphs of Diana, equipped for the chace, were seen following their stately Goddess through a neighbouring glade.

Many other sylvan sports were pictured in this wooded glen, and Fauns and Satyrs played their merry antics, startling the passers by as they peeped beneath the branches of the low-sweeping chestnut-trees ; and the vine-crowned Bacchantes danced around the bower of their God, and, with their attendants, made the woods echo to their jovial strains.

But amidst all this gaiety the heart of Melanthe grew sad, she scarce knew why, and tears started to her eyes as, emerging from the wood, she found herself as it were transported to the country of her birth, though alas ! to her it was known only by tradition. A joyous band of Greek maidens were

dancing the Romaika on the smooth green sward, and the melodious tones of the leader of the measure thrilled through the bosom of the poor exile, who, as she stood in the country of the stranger, thought with a bitter sigh on the ruined glories of her own bright land ! She did not dare to stay, and hastening forwards, the sound of the Grecian song was soon drowned in the clang of the cymbals that ushered in a gorgeous train, and the turbaned brows and jewelled scimitars of the princes of the East, cast into shade a company of lowly pilgrims, pacing meekly by with their shell-adorned robes and sandalled feet.

Melanthe turned from the crowd, and passing through an opening in the myrtle screen, paused to look upon and listen to the merry voices of a group of the most distinguished of the Florentine nobles, who, in illustration of a tale by Boccaccio, had seated themselves beneath the shade of some beautiful flowering shrubs surrounding a fountain, and were whiling away the hours, perhaps in reminiscences where mingled the poet's name,—perhaps in gentle tales made sweeter poetry by the hearts that breathed them, or the eyes that spoke.

But Melanthe passed them with a sigh, nor paused to listen to the Minstrel's song, as the lays of Provence sounded on her ear ; but hurried on, as though the gentle tones of love and joy were pain to hear. Many were the characters recalling the heroes of other days, from the laurel-crowned consul following the white robe of his lictors through the mazes of the crowd, to the splendour of the Emperors. Amongst these, the Count Girolamo Riario, who personated Augustus, moved forwards with a mockery of state, which he would fain have converted into reality. Every country, and every age, seemed to have rendered up its mighty dead in all the pomp and braveries they had worn in life, and, to the eye of Melanthe, who was deeply versed in the annals of the past, they arose as so many old familiar faces.

But theirs were not the features that she sought amongst the crowd ; though the sickliness of fancy ever seemed to present them to her view, showing a form that still, as she approached, would mock her touch and vanish into air. The conviction that, in an immense assemblage of persons, the single one our heart seeks, must of necessity be present, is

one of those inexplicable impressions by which reason is constantly overpowered. Although Melanthe felt that it was almost impossible that Montesecco could be in Florence, yet from the moment she had first beheld the multitude which overspread the gardens, her eye had involuntarily sought the form of him she loved. As she had last seen him, so did the uncontrollable impulse which forced her on, lead her to expect he would now appear, and among the gay and gorgeous dresses of the crowd, she looked only for the light armour of Milan steel inlaid with gold, and the long black plume that was wont to shadow the proud and beautiful brow of the young Condottiere.

Alas! she looked in vain. Montesecco came not; and Melanthe, chiding herself for the unreasonable expectation, at the same time that she wiped the tear of disappointment from her eyes, walked to and fro with her companions, striving to join in their amusement.

But the effort to keep her attention to the scene before her, became at length too trying, and she was upon the point of proposing to her companions that they should endeavour to approach

the house where she hoped to have an opportunity of seeing Lorenzo; when a sudden light, which illuminated the whole garden, induced her to pause, and curiosity soon took the place of her former languor. Then arose a scene of such unequalled beauty, that at first the multitude, assembled to behold it, was dumb from amazement.

At the lower part of the garden, the streams which watered it, had been purposely united until they formed a sheet of water extending to a considerable distance, and presenting the appearance of a broad river flowing at the foot of the hill. It was upon this water that was now represented one of those pageants which were, at that time, the rage in Italy, yet which, from the difficulty of their accomplishment, were generally confined to two or three subjects. But with Lorenzo de' Medici nothing was difficult. Before his master mind, all obstacles gave way, whether in the government of his country or the management of his masque; and, to the delight of the assembled crowd, the spectacle now exhibited, far surpassed any thing of the kind which they had ever before witnessed.

The first of the floating wonders which glided before the eyes, was an exact representation of Neptune and Amphitrite, who, surrounded by their Tritons and the Neriads, reposed on their splendid car, amidst rocks of coral, so artificially arranged, that they seemed to grow out of the water upon which they glided. This was followed by illustrations of Homer, amongst which Ulysses binding himself to the mast of his ship, in order to escape from his Circean tempters, was one of the most striking; the Syrens being personated by some of the most beautiful women of Florence; while unseen musicians supplied the melody, apparently flowing from the golden harps carried by the lovely ocean nymphs.

Many other subjects, equally well chosen for their beauty and scenic effect, were then displayed, and the mass of the people perfectly conversant with the immortal works of the poet, proclaimed their delight by the most joyous acclamations. During the whole of the scene, the entire bank on the opposite side of the water presented a continued blaze of light, for which preparations had

been duly made; while between the different parts of the representation a succession of the most brilliant fire-works was displayed.

A pause of some minutes had taken place, when the sound of soft music, breathed as it were from the bosom of the sparkling waters, drew the attention of all to the spot from whence it proceeded. Gradually it swelled upon the ear, till, from the shadow of the far woods emerged a stately vessel, whose masts and oars were of silver, and the sails of purple silk, glittering with thousands of silver stars. A fragrant cloud from the burning incense on her deck, was wafted forward by the gentle breeze, and, as it cleared away, the name of Cleopatra, mingled with that of Bianca de' Medici, burst from a thousand lips. It was indeed the beautiful Bianca, sister of Lorenzo, who appeared before the delighted assembly as the Egyptian Queen. Beneath a canopy of silver gauze, festooned with roses, she was seen reclining upon a couch; her sons, fair children, representing Cupids, kneeling by her side, and fanning her with peacocks' feathers. To continue the illusion, when, as the Paphian Queen rising from the sea, Cleopatra had glided on the wave of the

Cydnus, the management of the fairy vessel of Bianca was entrusted to the hands of boys disguised as mermaids and sea nymphs ; and such was the dexterity with which they acquitted themselves, that the gilded bark sailed rapidly by without the slightest difficulty. The enthusiasm of the spectators was unbounded ; and the people, enchanted to see that one of the family who was its idol, thus condescended to take a public part in their amusements, rent the air with shouts and blessings on the name of the Medici.

It was a splendid spectacle. The day had gone down, but the transparency of an Italian night, left all distinctly visible. Above was the dark outline of the distant mountains, between which and the gardens of the villa rose the singular and picturesque hill of Fiesole, crowned with the ruins of its ancient city. Lower down, the dark masses of the woods scattered over the immense extent of pleasure ground, where fairy lakes glittered, and fountains played amidst the flowers ; and temples and statues innumerable peeped out from their leafy screens, upon the restless crowd which was gathered on the banks of the water, and which

looked in the glare streaming from the opposite side as though some of every nation had come, at the bidding of Lorenzo, to do honour to his feast ; and as if even the Gods, unwilling to lose the charms of a scene so fair, had descended from Olympus to share the joys of mortal revels.

And Melanthe gazed around. She saw in all the working of that spirit so congenial to her own. She felt the power of that mind which could devise, and execute, and feel the beauty of such an hour, and such a scene. She heard the voices of thousands upraised in honour of one whose excellence she too acknowledged, and in the outpouring of grateful hearts one name was mingled with blessings and with prayers. One name—and she remembered that name might have been her own—might, if she so willed it, still be hers. One word, and she might stand as Queen upon that spot. She saw it all, felt it all ; and then when, by the excitement of the hour, and the intoxication of public approval, the actual conviction of the wealth, and station, and absolute power of Lorenzo was more vividly forced upon her feelings, did the mind of Melanthe waver ? Did she regret the words, by which she had bade

the lord of all she saw, rise from her feet a hopeless and rejected suitor? Did she think on Montesecco, the nameless and the poor, and did his long absence and apparent neglect rise up before her as crimes, whereby her own want of faith might be fully justified? No! The heart of man may tremble in its devotion, and lay upon a golden shrine its light and hollow vows; but woman's love, once truly given, is changeless in its faith!

CHAPTER XV.

THE banquet, which followed the conclusion of the masque, was in accordance with the splendour of all that had gone before; but as the object of Melanthe was, if possible, to meet with and speak to Lorenzo without the form of a regular announcement, which she feared might provoke more of the public attention than she felt equal to support, she accepted the offer of her companions to view from the gallery the circular hall of the villa, which was always set apart for the reception of the different members of the family of the Medici and the most distinguished of their guests. This arrangement was the effect more of the general and spontaneous courtesy of the Florentines towards their rulers, than from any desire on the part of the latter to exclude others; but when, at the conclusion of

the masque, it was announced that, in compliment to the Archbishop and the Legate of the Pope, Lorenzo would sup in the Hall of the Fountain, the body of the masquers took their way to the vast and commodious temporary apartments where the banquet was prepared for them in the garden, leaving such as were strangers, or whose curiosity prompted them, to take a nearer view of the renowned individuals to whom the villa belonged.

Of this number was Melanthe; and it was not without emotion that she found herself beneath the roof of Lorenzo. The Hall of the Fountain was so named from one of singular beauty by which it was ornamented. It was placed on the opposite side to the principal entrance to the hall. The water was so impelled that it reached almost to the height of the lofty ceiling, sometimes ascending in spiral lines, then turning in wreaths and feathery sprays, playing and sparkling in the light, till it fell, like a fairy cascade, between the fragrant branches of the orange and lemon trees, intermingled with bright flowering shrubs, arranged on either side of the marble basin beneath.

The banquetting hall of this summer palace of

the Medici was circular, and of immense height, and entirely lined with marble of the purest white. Two winding staircases, intersecting each other at intervals, formed as it were distinct galleries, supported on pillars of variously coloured marbles, the lower range being of porphyry, the second of the inestimable green jasper, and the upper row of the pale yellow marble of Sienna. At the base of the fountain was a beautiful sculptured group, representing the despair of Galatea, and the terror of her attendant nymphs; and the effect of the many other noble works of art ranged around the hall was heightened by the deep red of the porphyry, forming a rich base to the structure, the architectural beauty of which was the theme of every tongue. Countless lamps illumined the hall, those immediately above the fountain being variously coloured, which gave to the water playing in their light the appearance of a shower of gems.

The banquet was spread, and the guests began to arrive; and Melanthe, who had, with many others, placed herself on the lower gallery just above the principal table, watched anxiously for

the entrance of Lorenzo. In a few minutes he came, leaning, as he walked, upon the arm of Francesco Salviati, Archbishop of Pisa, and followed by Raffaele Riario, the Legate of the Holy See, a man who, although scarcely past the age of boyhood, had, within the last few weeks, been raised by the Pope, for his own purposes, to the dignity of a Cardinal.

The table was soon filled; and the beautiful Bianca, having finished her part in the masque, entered the hall with her husband, Guglielmo de' Pazzi, and took the seat appointed for her, which was at a table close behind that occupied by Lorenzo and his guests. Bianca was tenderly beloved by her brother, and perhaps the circumstance of her having married into a family whose jealousy of her own had been always more or less overtly displayed, increased the desire of Lorenzo to treat her with peculiar distinction. Melanthe remarked, that during supper he many times turned to the place where she was seated, and apparently addressed her with kindness; but the confusion of voices prevented his words being audible at a distance.

The supper was far advanced, and gaiety seemed at its height, when a movement was observable at the entrance of the hall, and an attendant announced, in a loud voice, the arrival of the Roman Ambassador. The recent reconciliation of the Pope and the city of Florence, being considered by the people as an event of great importance, added unusual excitement to the arrival of an Ambassador from his Holiness, and every eye was strained towards the door, to catch the first glimpse of him, who, besides the dignity of office, was so distinguished by military renown. In a few moments, the Ambassador entered the hall; in a few more, curiosity had given way to admiration; and the burst of applause, which rose simultaneously on all sides, and the cries of "Long live the Ambassador of the Pope;" "welcome to the brave Condottiere;" somewhat startled Montesecco, who was unprepared for such a reception.

Pausing for an instant, he removed the jewelled cap, whose lofty plumes partially shaded his face; and bending low, in courtesy to the applauding spectators, advanced to meet Lorenzo, who had come forward to receive him. So great was the

beauty of the form and features of Montesecco, that every movement seemed to kindle fresh admiration in the bosom of the crowd, and his name, with that of Lorenzo, was again lauded to the skies.

The superb appearance of the new Ambassador considerably heightened the enthusiasm in his favour; for the eyes of a people so fond of show as were the citizens of Florence, delighted to dwell upon the splendour of his accoutrements, as well as upon the grace and dignity of his deportment. The full dress of the Roman nobles which he wore, was richer than that which was customary at Florence. It consisted of a close-fitting doublet of cloth of gold, the sleeves slashed with purple satin, and looped with jewels, which glittered also on the hilt of his sword, and the belt by which it was suspended. A short cloak of purple velvet, barred with gold, and trimmed with a border of the richest sables, was clasped upon the left shoulder with a star of diamonds, and completed the magnificent dress by which Montesecco had replaced the armour he usually wore. The applause having subsided, the new Ambassador took his place at the table, the Archbishop making room for him between himself

and Lorenzo, and seemingly overwhelming him by his attention ; while the dark brow of Luca Pitti, who had entered with Montesecco, grew radiant with delight as he marked the reception bestowed upon the Ambassador of the Pope.

But, amidst this fever of enthusiasm, what words shall describe the feelings of Melanthe ? Fear and joy alternately predominated over the astonishment with which she had viewed the entry of Montesecco. In vain she addressed to her companions incoherent questions of the past. The light-hearted Italians thought only of the present hour, and all she could learn was, that the quarrel between Rome and Florence had been adjusted ; and that Montesecco, who had for some time commanded the armies of the Pope, had been named as his Ambassador, and had that very day arrived, although he had been expected in Florence for some time past. This information, though somewhat vague, told of many events which must have occurred during the seclusion from the world which the adventures of Melanthe had entailed upon her : but satisfied with the result, since it appeared to have almost miraculously effected her wishes, she forbore to inquire

further, and gave herself up to the delight engendered by the consciousness of once more finding herself in the presence of him she loved. The happiness of gazing upon him prevented her at first from remarking the changed expression of his countenance; but soon she observed with pain that the gentle smile which was wont to play upon his lips came not there; sorrow and bitterness sat upon his brow, and gave a look of care to a face that before was radiant with youth and hope. The sadness of his air filled the heart of Melanthe with still deeper love. Perhaps he was thinking of her, and remembering her own sorrow, and the torture of suspense she had suffered from his long silence, she wept unrestrainedly over the grief to which her gentle heart ascribed the alteration of his appearance. Such tears are, indeed, sweet, when we know that care is ended; and the overburthened heart of Melanthe relieved by them, soon rose from the state of despondency into which her many trials had plunged her. Filled with confidence by the arrival of Montesecco, she now rejoiced that Lorenzo was still ignorant of her being at Florence, and resolved to present herself to his eye only under

the care of her affianced husband. A day of hope was breaking. She thought of her poor father—of the faithful and affectionate Hassan—of Gennaro—and the happy re-union which the love of Montesecco and the power of Lorenzo would effect—and a fervent though silent prayer ascended to Heaven, for her heart was too full of joy !

CHAPTER XVI.

BUT Montesecco saw her not; and if, at that moment, the image of Melanthe crossed his mind, it was only as an incentive to the dark and bitter passions raging in his breast. Completely deceived by the machinations of Luca Pitti, Montesecco had yielded himself up as an instrument in the hands of the conspirators, and from having once been deaf to their entreaties, was now become the most zealous and blood-thirsty of the band. Little did those imagine, who gazed upon the noble form and features of the young ambassador, that beneath the jewels sparkling on his breast, the dagger of the assassin lay concealed; and little did they dream that clustering round the board at which sat their intended victim, calm and unsuspecting, were those whose sacred oath had bound them to do a deed, which would transmit their names branded with infamy to posterity. Dark was the age when such

a scheme was nurtured and contrived,—when the dignitaries of the Church, and the nobles of the land, could league together like a band of lawless ruffians, and enter the peaceful hall of an unsuspecting man, with an oath upon their lips that either he or they should not go forth alive.

Yet so it was. After deep and mature deliberation, the hour of the banquet had been chosen by the conspirators, for the murder of Lorenzo and Giuliano ; and the arrival of Montesecco had been purposely delayed by the artifices of Luca Pitti, who trembled lest the noble nature of the young man should rise superior to the hatred with which, impressed with the belief of the guilt of Melanthe, his heart now burned against Lorenzo. It was a daring resolve, thus, in the very hour of mirth, when the hearts of the gratified crowd warmed afresh towards their generous and courteous host, to slay him in their sight ; but the fickle nature of the people was well known to the conspirators. The only scions of the house of the Medici once cut off, the multitude would rally round the existing power. The authority of the Pope would sanction the deed, and numbers would flock to his banner,

whom fear and weakness had hitherto deterred from declaring their hostility to Lorenzo. The risk might be great, but the result was certain ; and so numerous was the body of conspirators, that delay promised more danger than the attempt.

And Montesecco, the noble and the brave, was the man selected for so vile a deed. In the blood of Lorenzo, the stain on the honour of Melanthe must be washed out ; and Montesecco, as he sat beside his victim, had need of this dreadful thought, or he had failed in his murderous intent. The manner of Lorenzo was so winning, that it was difficult to resist its influence ; added to which, and, as it were in spite of his own resolution, the heart of Montesecco was touched.

It is impossible to look upon one, however guilty he may be, whose hours on earth are numbered, without a degree of interest, which is full of a strange fascination. To watch the gradual ebb of life, even when the attenuated form and lustreless eye tell of a long preparation for the coming hour, is sufficiently painful ; but to behold face to face, a fellow creature, full of life, and health, and intellect, and to know that ere a few moments have

passed, the soul that is within will stand before its Creator, and the inanimate clay lie helpless at our feet, is a sensation so terrible, and full of awe, that even when upheld by law, reason quails beneath it, as it questions the right of man to do a deed thus fearful! But when this deed is voluntary and premeditated,—when hatred, not justice, points the steel, and jealous ambition nerves the arm to do the hangman's work, then, if there be still a human feeling in his heart, must the breast of the murderer, glaring on his victim even as a tiger crouches ere he springs, throb with all the pangs of terror and conscious guilt!

Writhing with these feelings, Montesecco sat by the side of Lorenzo; still, though the dread shadow of the vengeance of God fell upon him, human passion and human sin did their deadly work, and wrapped him in their folds. His resolution did not waver—one thought was in his mind, one vision before his eyes. Melanthe false—Melanthe degraded—wandering homeless on the earth,—his own Melanthe, before whom he had poured out his soul's worship. Her betrayer was at his side; and Montesecco, steeling his heart to all emotion, grasped

the dagger concealed in his robe, and kept his eye fixedly upon Luca Pitti.

The appointed signal was to be the rising of Luca Pitti to give the health of Lorenzo. Then would Montesecco plunge the steel into the heart of his unsuspecting host, while Francesco de' Pazzi would stab Giuliano, whose seat was on the opposite side of the hall; and the Archbishop was immediately to declare the Medici tyrants, and proclaim the citizens of Florence free to choose any form of government most pleasing to them. In case of resistance, messengers were in readiness to be dispatched to the troops which had been purposely posted on the frontier of the Florentine territory. All was prepared, and many an anxious glance was directed towards the spot where Luca Pitti sat: but he did not move; and it was observed that he frequently turned towards the door, as if in expectation of an arrival. The hall was so crowded that it was impossible for Montesecco, without quitting his place, to distinguish the occupants of the other tables; but the evening was advancing, and still the signal was not given. Montesecco began to grow alarmed, lest some acci-

dent should betray their secret, when a low voice, close to his ear, exclaimed,

“ All is lost,—Giuliano will not come !”

Montesecco slightly turned his head, and the scowling brow of Francesco de' Pazzi was just discernible under the hood of the Pilgrim, which was the disguise he had adopted. The plan had thus unexpectedly failed ; since to murder Lorenzo without his brother would in no way have advanced the designs of the conspirators. All hope for the time was at an end. With a beating heart, Montesecco watched the russet gown of the pretended pilgrim, till he saw it reach the side of Luca Pitti, who immediately rose and quitted the hall ; and then Montesecco, not daring to trust himself another moment by the side of Lorenzo, arose also, and sought the open air.

CHAPTER XVII.

As the gorgeous sunlight mellows at eve, so, as the festival advanced, had the fever of hilarity and excitement subsided into a calmer spirit and a more gentle joy. The dance and the song went on, and large awnings were spread for those who chose to join in the amusement without remaining in the open air. The most beautiful parts of the garden were brilliantly illuminated, lamps of every device and colour, representing a variety of the brightest fruit and flowers, being suspended from the branches of the trees, and carried by wire-work above the fountains and streams.

Bitter to the chilled and guilty heart were these signs of rejoicing. Montesecco, on quitting the house, passed swiftly on through the sparkling scene, and sought the shelter of a high grove of oak, which promised a moment of retirement from the crowd. The path he had selected led to a terrace

on the border of the broad stream, which was so completely screened by the thick foliage of the trees, that the glare of the lamps did not mingle with the flood of silver light in which the spot was bathed. Montesecco paused as he reached the bank, and looked around. The water rippled by at his feet, again and again softly kissing the bright ray playing on its breast, as though it loved to linger in its embrace. There was peace upon the earth, and breathing through the still air came the sound of the distant music, even as a happy sigh redolent of joy and love. Montesecco lifted his eyes to Heaven, and beholding its calm majesty, and the gleam of the many stars, like the glance of angels' eyes smiling gently down, he turned mournfully from a scene, the peace of which was too strongly contrasted with the tempest now raging in his own breast.

The nature of Montesecco was changed. Irritated to madness by the sorrow of which the supposed delinquency of Melanthe was the cause, he was as if under a spell. Driven onwards by its power, he had bound himself to do a deed his soul abhorred; and although in the age in which he lived, many a less crime than that with which, in

his eyes, Lorenzo stood charged, was daily atoned for with life, yet the honest heart of Montesecco called such a vengeance by its true name of murder ! Dire must have been the hatred, and wild the rage, that could have warped the uprightness of his nature ; but goaded by distress of mind, he had rushed blindly on, as though to end his life and misery with one stroke.

The failure of the conspiracy had worked a fearful change within his breast. By the sudden alteration of the plans of the conspirators, the tension of his feelings had been relaxed, and his ideas thrown into confusion. But in the midst of all, a sensation was uppermost like that of a criminal just reprieved. His hand was yet unstained by blood ; and secretly his heart blessed Heaven that it was so ; and, as he paced up and down that lonely walk, apart from the crowd, and removed from the influence of human passions, and looked upon the tranquil scene and the glorious firmament, he seemed to awake suddenly from the delirium of anger and pride, and to stand alone with his God. His oath to the conspirators, which his eyes had beheld registered upon the scroll containing their names,

appeared displayed before him :—but above it, the words, “Thou shalt do no murder !” in letters of fire, seemed to scorch his brain ; and horror of his intended crime took possession of his soul.

Long and deeply did he ponder upon his state. Snatched, as it were, by the hand of God, from the precipice down which he was about to plunge, should he again rush to its fearful verge ? His head grew giddy with such thoughts ; and throwing himself upon a seat, he endeavoured to chase the gloomy images from his soul. By degrees, he became more calm. The stillness of the hour, the beauty of the scene, lent their aid to dissolve the iron spell that bound him, and his thoughts gradually softened. But, perhaps, this state, if more in accordance with his better nature, was yet more difficult of endurance. It is so impossible, especially to the young, to look calmly forward to life as a blank and dreary void, and what now had Montesecco to cheer him on his path ? His beacon star had set, and for ever ! Melanthe lost, what was to him fortune or fame ? The secret of his birth—a secret which, had the fate of another been entwined with his own, he would have devised some means of forcing Luca

Pitti to reveal, was now valueless. The poetry of life was gone. His nature, fervent and devoted, could know no other love. Melanthe was false, and he was desolate for ever ! And with the name of one so deeply loved, came bitter thoughts—thoughts of past days, when, bright and beautiful, she had shone upon his sight, even as the sun gladdens the face of Nature—when, from her lips, words pure as an infant's thoughts had blessed his ear. Pure, holy, and true, was Melanthe when he had left her. Alas ! what had wrought this fearful change in one so lofty of purpose and firm of soul ? Grief, bitter grief, filled the heart of Montesecco, as he thought on the fall and the future fate of the being he had so tenderly loved. As he raised his head, there were tears upon his cheek—tears wrung from the soldier's heart by the falsehood of that in which he trusted ; and the wretched man buried his face in his hands, as though to stifle the sob which burst from his bosom.

“ Montesecco ! ” said a low voice close to his side. He started ; but the veiled and shrouded figure that met his eye revealed nothing of the form of the speaker.

“ Oh ! why do you weep ? speak to me,” said the voice which now trembled, and had lost its tone.

“ Who are you ?” asked Montesecco, shuddering as a gentle hand was laid upon his arm.

“ Cruel !” replied the stranger, “ you do not know me—I should have known you even - - - ”

“ Heavens !” interrupted Montesecco, “ that voice—it cannot be - - - ”

“ It is—it is—your own Melanthe !” she cried, as, throwing off her hood and mask, she rushed to the arms of Montesecco.

“ Melanthe ! O God ! away ! do not touch me,” he exclaimed almost with a shriek, as he started from her.

“ Away ? Montesecco—dearest—what can you mean ?” said Melanthe, as she stood with outstretched arms before him.

“ Leave me,” said Montesecco hoarsely ! “ we must never meet again :” and he turned as if to depart.

“ Not meet again,” said Melanthe, springing towards him and endeavouring to take his hand ; “ oh, this is some jest—though a cruel one. You

know not how I have sought you—watched for you. Montesecco, speak—speak to me !”

“ I cannot—base, perjured as you are !”

Melanthe sunk upon her knees before him.

“ Go, ” resumed Montesecco contemptuously, “ go kneel before him, who has made you what you are ;—kneel, and weep, and pray, that with his gold and with his power, he may yet make you a name better than that I would have given.”

“ How ?” said Melanthe, passing her hand over her brow.

“ These words - - -”

“ Must I speak more clearly ?” interrupted Montesecco, with difficulty controlling the rage and grief which swelled his heart. “ Lorenzo is powerful, and rich beyond belief. He will not marry one who is degraded in his eyes. The state would interpose. You must quit Florence ; let Lorenzo use his power for your sake, and save the name of Melanthe from the brand of public infamy. You are not made to bear it. Take these last words of counsel from one whose heart your falsehood has broken. Adieu !”

“ Stay,” said Melanthe, as she tried to wind her

arms round him, "you are unjust—deceived—I am innocent!"

"Ay," said Montesecco bitterly; "perhaps so, in the world's view. You have been tempted—deceived—and you have been false!—false to one, who would have given his heart's blood for you."

"No, no," shrieked the wretched girl, "I have loved but you."

"Loved—perhaps so," said Montesecco, endeavouring to free himself from her grasp. "Yet I ask no more than this," and he raised the mask of Melanthe from the ground.

"Disguised—concealed; why come you thus to his house? Because you *dared not* to meet the public eye. False girl, farewell! May Heaven forgive your crime!" and Montesecco, forcibly disengaging her twining fingers from his cloak, rushed from the spot, and was soon lost to sight.

Melanthe rose from the ground, straining her arms upon her breast. "False!" she repeated in a low hoarse tone, "false—and to him!" As she spoke, the sense of her desolate position overcame her: sinking on her knees, she raised her

clasped hands to Heaven—her constant trust—her only hope—and she tried to pray : but the words died upon her lips ; for, as she looked upon the glorious sky, it darkened, and she saw a veil of black come slowly down, and another—and another followed ; and all the glistening stars fell round about like ink spots on the ground, joining and swelling, till a sea of black rose circling to her feet, and from the heart of that deep death-like gloom the sobbing night-wind came, playing with sickly moan and icy breath upon her shivering frame—colder—and colder—till she felt no more.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“ HARK ! the trumpet sounds ; and see, the Legate and the Archbishop are leaving the palace ! By heaven, not a word of welcome is vouchsafed to them by the rabble that crowd the square ; and yet did one of the accursed Medici appear, hundreds of caps would fly into the air, while it rung with the accustomed clamour. I am weary of this.”

These words were uttered, in a bitter tone, by Francesco de’ Pazzi, who, under pretence of visiting his kinsman, Guglielmo, had been for some days resident in Florence ; and, from the windows of the palace, watched, with a jealous eye, the movements of the populace lingering in the city, only long enough to see the departure of the gallant train, which was to accompany Lorenzo and his guests to the arena without the walls,

where the combat of wild beasts was that day to take place.

At the exclamation of Francesco, Guglielmo de' Pazzi approached the window. That instant a simultaneous shout burst from all parts of the square. Mounted on a noble steed, a horseman rapidly advanced to meet the Cardinal and the Archbishop; and the cries of "Palle! palle! viva Lorenzo!" grew yet louder, as their young favourite, taking off his cap, bowed his thanks graciously to the people. In a few moments the square was deserted; but the joyous cries of the mob were still heard, as it followed the steps of the horsemen.

The cheek of Francesco reddened as he beheld this fresh proof of the public affection with which the object of his hatred was regarded; and Guglielmo, who, although a conspirator, could not forget that, as the husband of Bianca de' Medici, a portion of the popularity of his brother-in-law extended to himself, took occasion to observe,

"Do you think they will shout so for us, Francesco, when their present idol is laid low?"

"Louder still, if we begin by ministering to

their pleasures," replied Francesco; "they are fickle as the wind."

"Yet," observed Guglielmo, doggedly, "my opinion is that our scheme will be marred in the execution. I never can believe that the hour of a festival is propitious to our plans. Why select the time when the people, full of mirth, and excited by wine, will the more fiercely resent an attack upon those who have provided for their amusement?"

"Because the very hour of excitement is that in which a populace is the most easily led. Only give an impetus to their fury, they care little on which side they fight."

"Ah! that is Luca Pitti's doctrine; but I am not so fully persuaded of its truth. After all, the absence of Giuliano from the masque at Fiesole had something ominous in it—it was the first time that I ever remember his absenting himself from a festival; he is as fond of gaiety and show as the rest of the good citizens of Florence. For my part, I think they have all gone mad since Lorenzo has been in power. Do you not think it is rather a pity to disturb their pleasures?"

"How?" said Francesco, sharply, not liking the

half-earnest tone in which these words were uttered by Guglielmo. "Would you retract?"

"No," said Guglielmo, firmly; "whatever I may think, I will not retract. I have sworn to stand or fall with those of my own blood—but Bianca - - -"

"Will forget a brother, when she shares the good fortune of a husband," replied Francesco. "And if she should not," he added, sternly, "are individual considerations to stand in the way of the interests of a family like our's? Are tyrants to flourish, because a woman weeps? and the noblest in the land to live in exile at the bidding of two beardless boys, for they are scarce more, who tread upon our necks, as though we were their vassals or their slaves?"

"True," replied Guglielmo, "the number of the exiled nobles increases every day. It is time to put a check upon the overgrown power that will otherwise annihilate us all."

"It must be done, and speedily," said Francesco; "but now let us follow to the show—our absence might be remarked. To-night, Lorenzo sups in private with Jacopo and the fair Clarice

Orsini, who have arrived from Rome. The day of the marriage will then be fixed. Little dreams the gentle bride that the name of the Medici will perish from the earth ere it can become her own."

The triumphant tone in which Francesco uttered these words, while they instilled confidence, yet made the heart of Guglielmo sicken, as he thought of the misery about to fall on so many innocent persons.

"We meet to-night," he said to Francesco, as they were about to leave the apartment.

"To-night, at Montughi," replied Francesco. "The hour will then finally be fixed; and woe to him who is found wanting when it arrives!" So saying, they separated; and each mounting his horse proceeded alone towards the scene of the amusement of the day, which they were to leave early, in order to debate afresh the most fitting moment for the accomplishment of their murderous deed.

Within three days after the masque at Fiesole the people of Florence were delighted by a spectacle, which, even in that intellectual age, still possessed an unaccountable charm in their eyes.

The combats of wild beasts, after the manner of the ancients, were a favourite pastime, although the progress of civilization had put an end to the most appalling part of the spectacle—the sacrifice of human life.

A large space, at the distance of a mile from the city, had been enclosed for the purpose. In the midst were trees, which had been partially stripped of their branches; and the dens of the animals were placed at intervals round the arena, and concealed from view by hangings and curtains which fell from the gallery above, containing rows of seats elevated one above the other, and protected by an awning from the heat of the sun. The expense of these entertainments was enormous; and so great the demand at that time for wild beasts, that each was bought at a price many times higher than it would have produced at a later day. This, when the great number that were sacrificed at each exhibition is considered, will account for the immense outlay required; and never did the popularity of Lorenzo rise to such a height with all classes of persons, as when, at his own expense, he revived these ancient combats.

The present exhibition had been judiciously appointed to take place immediately after the masque at Fiesole, in order that the poorer people should also have their share in the rejoicings, in honour of the renewal of the friendship of the Pope with the republic of Florence; for it was ever a part of the wise policy of Lorenzo to combine the interest of the state with the individual gratification of its citizens. Thousands of persons flocked to the arena; and it was whispered in the crowd, that, besides the ordinary exhibitions, something hitherto unknown was about to be displayed for their amusement. This did not, however, diminish the eagerness with which they watched the first onset between the furious animals, who, the better to excite their rage, had been kept for a considerable time without food.

At every fresh victory obtained by the enraged beasts over each other, the shouts of the people filled the air; and the animals, still more excited by the noise, added the most frightful roars to the fury with which they attacked their enemy. When any of them, either from cowardice or injury, refused to fight, he was instantly withdrawn to his

den by means of a net, which, running on a rope extending across the arena, could be dropped at pleasure, and was secured by a spring. By these means, only the more savage beasts remained ; and such was the carnage, that, before the conclusion of the show, above twenty lions and tigers lay dead within the arena, besides panthers, leopards, hyenas, and a variety of lesser animals, which had played their part in this bloody spectacle, to the delight of the assembled multitude.

The fight had been prolonged for several hours ; but the day was drawing to a close, when the gates of the arena were opened, and a number of keepers with their attendants having entered the enclosure, the ground was soon cleared of the carcasses with which it was covered. For a few minutes nothing more appeared, when the hangings on one side of the gallery were observed to move. All eyes were turned towards the spot. The curtains were slowly withdrawn, and four stately cameleopards walked quietly forth into the midst of the arena. The voice of thousands was hushed in a moment, for surprise had struck every one dumb.

It was the first time the cameleopard had ever been seen in Europe; and although, from the recitals of travellers, the existence of such an animal might have been supposed to have been ascertained, yet it is a recorded fact, that, until the moment of its production at Florence by Lorenzo de' Medici, to whom it had been sent as a present by the Soldan of Egypt, the cameleopard had been always regarded by Europeans as a fabulous creation. After the savage nature of the previous scene, the gentleness of these beautiful animals was a subject of no less delight to the assembled multitude, than was their novel and striking appearance. The people seemed as if they could never tire watching the stately and peaceful movements of the gigantic animals, who, apparently undismayed by the surrounding crowd, cropped the leaves of the trees, and lifted their beautiful heads over the barriers, as if to take a nearer view of those for whose amusement they had been brought from their native land. But the silence was soon broken by exclamations of delight and wonder, and again the name of the Medici was heard around.

“It is for the last time,” muttered Luca Pitti, as he turned his horse, to depart on his road to join the conspirators at Montughi. As he rode through the now deserted streets of the city, his own half-finished palace was the spot upon which his fierce looks rested, and he ground his teeth as he passed the walls. At the gate of the villa of Jacopo de’ Pazzi, at Montughi, he overtook Francesco and Guglielmo, who were going to the meeting.

“What news?” exclaimed Francesco, as he reined up his horse beside that of Luca Pitti.

“Heaven smiles upon us,” replied the latter. “The Cardinal has requested that on Sunday high mass may be celebrated in the church of the Reparata. Lorenzo has consented. He and Giuliano will attend. This is Friday—one day more, and we are free!”

CHAPTER XIX.

It was Sunday. Five days had elapsed, and Melanthe had not quitted the room to which she had been conveyed by the persons who had accompanied her to Fiesole; and who, after a long search, had found her, apparently lifeless, lying on the terrace where her interview with Montesecco had taken place. It was not without terror that the good Caterina beheld the pitiable state in which Melanthe was brought back to her house: but all that care and kindness could effect was speedily done for the young stranger; and when, at length, she was restored to consciousness, a few words sufficed to induce the kind-hearted Italians to believe that over-fatigue was alone the cause of the indisposition which had so much alarmed them.

But there was one near, who was not so easily deceived. Gennaro, whose own unhappy love had taught him those deep hidden secrets of the heart,

unfathomable to a spirit at ease, knew that neither illness nor fatigue could have thus prostrated the mental powers of Melanthe. Deeply now did he regret not having accompanied her to the masque. An undefined presentiment of sorrow had been the cause of his refusal to do so. Although ignorant of the arrival of Montesecco at Florence, Gennaro had frequently imagined the possibility of such an event; and his heart was ever oppressed by a fear of meeting the man to whom he knew the affections of Melanthe were devoted. He did not hate Montesecco—the love of Melanthe rendered him sacred; but Gennaro trembled in his presence. He trembled as though he imagined his rival to be in possession of some supernatural power; for to one writhing under the agony of unrequited love, it does seem, even in defiance of reason, as though the unbounded influence exercised over the object of their affection by another, must have been attained by some superhuman means. To a young and sanguine spirit, it is difficult to believe that love cannot beget love, so hard is it to understand that no devotion, no sacrifice of self, can turn the unwilling heart; and to feel that when every affection, and

every faculty has been strained to the utmost, it scarcely excites a sentiment of cold gratitude.

It is not, therefore, surprising that Gennaro, who was naturally superstitious, and whose mute sorrow rendered him doubly sensitive to impressions once formed, at length arrived at the conclusion that Montesecco possessed some peculiar gift from Heaven, which rendered him all powerful. Hitherto, Gennaro had forbore to allude to the past when in conversation with Melanthe; for conversation was, without difficulty, carried on between them, sometimes by signs, at others by writing, and for this purpose he always carried tablets of ivory. The same feeling of delicacy which had prevented him from speaking of Montesecco, had taught Gennaro to bury his own hopes within his bosom. He felt that Melanthe did not love him—that she considered him as a child; and although his young heart beat with all the noblest emotions of man, he preferred, in the gentleness of his nature, to remain in her eyes as she chose to regard him, rather than inflict upon her the pain which he had once seen that his professions of affection had caused. The steadiness with which Gennaro had followed

up this determination had worked its own reward ; for, during their journey, they had seemed to be almost the friends of former days, and Melanthe had once again turned upon him her old sweet smile. And his heart had been comforted. Alas ! was this also to vanish so soon ?

From the moment when Gennaro had seen the inanimate form of Melanthe borne back to the chamber which she had quitted but a short time previously in spirits and in health, it seemed as though death had laid its icy fingers upon his heart. Day and night, he sat by the couch on which she lay, bathing with his tears the hand she unconsciously abandoned to him ; but no communication upon the subject of her sorrow passed between them.

At length, Melanthe appeared partially to recover. She arose, and by degrees her thoughts became more collected. Still she did not speak, though now and then she turned a look upon Gennaro, who sat at her feet, as though she would have said something ; but the effort was too great. It was evident that she could not tell the cause of her distress ; and Gennaro, who, more than once,

had traced upon the tablet the question he longed to ask, restored the ivory to his bosom, as he gazed upon the wan cheek and fixed eyes of her he so much loved, and whose faculties appeared frozen by some secret pain. He could not add to her sorrow, and he bore on in silence, although his heart was breaking. And thus, for many days, these two young creatures sat side by side, looking on each other's grief—soul watching soul, as its frail tenement seemed fading from the earth; and yet neither knew to the full extent the sorrow of the other.

This could not last. Death or madness must ensue, if an effort were not made, and the stronger mind was the first to awake from the stupor of distress. Melanthe looked upon the cheek of Gennaro. It was hollow, and his colourless lips were thin and pinched. Was it for her that he thus grieved? She laid her hand gently upon his shoulder. He started, and looked up, and joy, like the flash of a sunbeam, played across his pallid face as he marked the look of kindness which Melanthe turned upon him. She made him a sign to give her the tablets; and taking them hastily

from his hand, she read the words which he had traced, but had not shown to her. One line contained a prayer that she would confide to him the secret of her grief. "To-morrow, you shall know all!" was the answer she wrote; and Gennaro threw himself upon his knees before her, and passionately kissed her hands. Melanthe, with a faint sad smile, pointed to the door, and, satisfied that she was now recovering, Gennaro instantly withdrew.

Then Melanthe knelt down, and prayed; and she arose comforted! She did not weep. It was the hour for endurance, not for tears; and all that night she sat alone, communing with herself. She looked back upon her past life; and satisfied that she could not recall to mind one act of voluntary sin, she turned courageously to the future; for she felt that she still had serious duties to perform, ere she might yield up her heart to the misery which preyed upon it.

Deprived of the protection, upon which, through her many trials, she had so trustingly relied, her position had become more difficult than ever. Abandoned by Montesecco, she felt abandoned by the whole world. She turned her eyes to Rome;

but the image of the Cardinal Borgia rose before her ; and she trembled, and shrunk, as though in his hated presence, whilst the words he had uttered in his rage recurred to her mind,—“ *Montesecco shall spurn thee while kneeling at his feet !*” She had knelt at his feet, and *he had spurned her !* The recollection nearly overwhelmed the fortitude of the unhappy girl ; but soon the loftiness which was inherent in her nature, came to her support. Montesecco had scorned her professions of innocence. Should she humble herself before one who had doubted her honour, and refused to give credence to her word ? Could she stoop to receive as a boon, that which she regarded as a right ? It must not be. Secure in her conscious integrity, and pureness of faith, she would meet him on equal terms, or relinquish him for ever ; and, as she dwelt upon these thoughts, again the spirit of pride arose to chase away the shadow of her grief. But it was pride of her lover, not of herself. He thought her guilty, and he renounced her. His high sense of honour forbade all other course ; and Melanthe, in the unflinching nobleness of her soul, admired and approved even while her woman’s

heart quailed beneath the blow. It was clear that Montesecco had been deceived; and her mind reverted to the Cardinal, who was the only enemy of whose existence she was aware. She knew the consummate artifice of Borgia, and felt that appearances might be made to justify his accusation; and should Montesecco have been by them convinced of her unworthiness, and yet preserved his love, she would then have spurned, for she would have despised him. The sincerity of these sentiments strengthened the courage with which Melanthe endeavoured to meet the difficulties of her position; still there were moments when feelings of tenderness warred against the spirit of endurance, and the strife was bitter: but she struggled on, placing, as it were, her sorrow under the safeguard of conscious rectitude, and during the many hours of that sleepless night, she endeavoured to bring her senses under the control necessary to instant decision.

After mature deliberation, the plan which had at first occurred to her was that which she resolved to adopt—she would throw herself upon the mercy of him, who had so unhesitatingly condemned her, Jacopo Orsini, who, on the first whisper against

her, had expelled her from his house, was the person to whom she would address her prayer. He was the father of her early friend Clarice, and to his paternal feelings she would appeal for protection. She determined to write to him a full statement of all that she had suffered, and entreat his interference on behalf of her poor father, upon whose prolonged agony she ever thought in trembling.

This letter, with others for Hassan and her father, she resolved to entrust to Gennaro, to whom she was about to reveal all that she had hitherto kept secret from him; and having provided him with proper attendants, the means of doing which, from the jewels she wore, were in her power, she would send him to Rome; and retiring into one of the many Florentine convents, the doors of which were always open to strangers, she would await, under the protection of the abbess, intelligence of the result of his mission.

It might so happen that before that time Vanozia would have found the means of fulfilling her promise; a promise which she had made with such confidence of success, that Melanthe still trusted in its

accomplishment. The more simple course would have been at once to inform Lorenzo of all that had happened; yet from this the nature of Melanthe shrunk with invincible repugnance; and she resolved that nothing but the failure of every other support should induce her to make known her sorrows to the man who had been so unintentionally the cause of them.

Relieved by the decision she had formed, the mind of Melanthe grew more calm. She threw herself upon her couch, in the hope of obtaining repose; but sleep, like love, is a wayward spirit, ever absent when most invoked. After some time, Melanthe again arose. Feverish and unrefreshed, she approached the window, and threw it open. The prospect before her was very limited. The house of Caterina was in the suburb of the city. Beyond the narrow street, was the little garden she loved and tended with the care of one who has nought else left to love. It was merely a small square piece of ground, hemmed in on two sides by the high walls of a neighbouring convent, while the third was completely shadowed by the projecting roof of a large silk manufactory. A stunted

palm, a few mulberry trees, and myrtle bushes, constituted the chief verdure of the garden of poor Caterina; but there were roses, and the beautiful flowering cistus forcing their way in wild luxuriance among straggling clusters of jessamine and honeysuckle; and, as Melanthe leaned from the window, the air was heavy with the fragrance of the flowers. There was something of sadness in their blooming thus alone in that secluded spot, clinging in helpless loveliness and with feeble grasp to those high frowning walls, that seemed to shut them out from kindred gladness in the sunny fields; and Melanthe, as she looked at their beautiful heads, drooping with the heavy dew of the spring morning, felt a sensation of pity arise in her breast.

The tears of these bright things were as a type of her own sorrow; and with a sigh she turned from the window, and sitting down at a table, upon which she had prepared her materials for writing, she began the letters, of which Gennaro was to be the bearer to Rome. She had not been long thus employed, when a sound beneath the window startled her. It was a sound of knocking, and the

hurried whisperings of voices reached her—then all was still. In a few moments, a heavy step was heard upon the stairs—nearer and nearer it came, then paused—the door of her room opened, and, wrapped in the large dark cloak worn by horsemen of that period, Montesecco stood before her. The astonishment of Melanthe gave way before the terror with which she gazed upon his altered appearance. Years seemed to have been added to his age, since she had last beheld him. His tall form was bent, his step uncertain, and the deadly paleness of his face betrayed the agony of mind he suffered.

“Melanthe!” he said, “I have not come to reproach, but to entreat your pardon. When we last met, my words were harsh. Can you forgive me?”

“Yes!” said Melanthe, calmly, but in a very low voice,—“I do forgive you!”

“Oh! no, you cannot,” he exclaimed, wildly; “you know not what I ask, or what you say—you cannot forgive one so deeply sunk in crime as I am!”

“Crime!” echoed Melanthe, “you guilty?—oh,

no!" she added, with a shudder, "I will not believe it,—I could not do so."

The reproach these gentle words contained struck sharply to the heart of him to whom they were addressed; but the past was less in his thoughts than the present, and the terrible future. Love had given way to horror and despair, and he clasped his hands over his eyes while he replied,

"You must—you will; it is that you may fully do so, that I am now here,—that I have sought you even while death is on my track—death above, around, before me, everywhere I turn, nothing but death! Oh! I could have met it on the field, braved it a thousand times, or bid it welcome in the cause of honour, or of love; but to die a felon's death, a murderer! - - -"

"Ah!" said Melanthe, with a shriek, and looking wildly round, "who spoke of murder?" And, as she pronounced the word, she shuddered and advanced instinctively nearer to the side of Montesecco.

"I did!" he replied solemnly; "for the crime is mine!"

“ Oh ! do not speak such words,” said Melanthe, raising her eyes, in agony, to the face of her lover.

“ Yes !” he replied, “ I am a murderer ! The deed and the design are one—the sin is on my soul - - - And you—would you know the cause ? would you know what has worked the ruin of him who loved you ? - - - It is yourself !”

“ I !” exclaimed Melanthe, looking at him with a bewildered air, “ I the cause ! It is impossible. This is some madness.”

“ No,” replied Montesecco, sadly, “ would that it were—that I might even for one short hour forget that I am Montesecco, and that you were once my own Melanthe ! Oh ! I am not mad ! If you would know how this black intent seized upon my soul, turn your eyes inward—search your own false and changing heart ; and, having sounded its most treacherous depths, look back to days gone by, when, blessed in each other’s love, each hour was witness to our mutual vows. I was happy then ! Of all the treasures that the earth contains, I coveted but one—that one was mine. I left it for a time unguarded—no, not unguarded, for the

spirit of my own truth watched over it. All was vain. It was stolen—stolen as I slept secure. I awoke—I was a beggar on the earth—and then I swore that he who had done this deed should answer for it to me with his life ! ”

“ Still then,” said Melanthe, struggling to appear calm, “ you believe me guilty ? ”

“ Would to Heaven that I could doubt it ! ” exclaimed Montesecco, passionately.

“ ’Tis well ! ” said Melanthe, as she bowed her head ; but the tone of her voice was so low it did not reach the ear of Montesecco, who continued rapidly,

“ From that hour, I had but one thought. I joined the conspiracy long since formed against the Medici. I joined it heart and hand,—I longed to glory in the act that was to avenge my love, and only prayed that I might strike the blow that was to spill the life-blood of the hated Lorenzo ! For this, I came to Florence ; for this, I stooped to come ambassador from him, who, safe in the papal chair, sends forth his myrmidons of murder beneath the cope and stole. For this, I left the soldier’s

honourable strife to act the assassin's part. The masque at Fiesole was to have been the hour - - -"

"*Was!*" interrupted Melanthe; "then, it is not too late. Lorenzo lives—oh! tell me that yet he lives!"

"One hour from hence I dare not say 'He lives!'" replied Montesecco, as he cast a glance upon the brightening day.

"Oh fly! save him! save yourself!" cried Melanthe, distractedly.

"It is too late!" said Montesecco. "I have renounced the deed. I stand before you a twofold traitor. Oh! Melanthe, why did we meet at Fiesole? Had we not met, I could have struck the blow, and died! But now, irresolution has destroyed me. I saw you, and I thought, Lorenzo dead, what then must be your fate? I thought on this, and found I could not kill the man that loved you. Oh! I am mad, when I think of this—I, who so worshipped you!" and Montesecco, covering his face with his hands, sobbed aloud.

In the midst of grief and terror a thrill of rapture shot through the heart of Melanthe.

Montesecco still loved her - - - But these thoughts were for the future ; for beneath the anguish of her lover she felt the terrible secret lay yet concealed. She approached him, and unheeding the construction he might put upon her words, her only thought being to save him from the guilt into which he had been hurried, she said,

“ There is yet time ; Lorenzo must be saved ! Speak—say, how it may be done.”

“ It is too late. Hark ! ” he exclaimed, as the slow peal of a church bell was heard. “ The murderers are round him. In the church of the Reparata there is high mass—when the priest raises the host, then will Lorenzo die. Two priests even now make ready the dagger beneath their robe ; and I, who had sworn to do it, fly like a craven ere the hour arrives. I said *I dared not* in the house of God ;—but you, Melanthe, you were my God. I, pitied you ! Oh ! may all-pitying Heaven forgive me, I know not what I say ! ”

“ God will forgive, if you repent,” said Melanthe.

“ Repent,” said Montesecco with a stupified air.

Just then, the sound of voices and the trampling of many feet was heard beneath the window.

“ They have murdered him,” he whispered hoarsely ; “ and now they are looking for me—a traitor to both sides—they seek my life ! ”

The bell tolled louder, and Melanthe sprung to the window :—“ The people flock to the church—he may yet be warned - - - Oh God, support me ! ”

Melanthe, as she spoke, endeavoured hurriedly to adjust the hood and scarf of black silk, without which no woman of condition ever appeared in the street ; but her hands trembled so she could scarcely accomplish tying the strings. “ Lorenzo—murdered !—oh Heavens ! ” she murmured in a tone of anguish.

“ Poor girl ! how she loves him,” said Montesecco apart, as he looked compassionately upon her. But she saw him not—she was ready, and in another moment had quitted the room. Montesecco watched till her steps had borne her from the street ; and then he listened—there was no sound.

“ The bell—the bell ! ” he cried distractedly ;

“ she cannot be near the church. Hark ! oh ! for one toll more to tell that yet he lives.” All was silent - - -

“ It is too late ! ” he said, with a deep groan ; and, as he closed the window, he buried his head in the folds of his cloak, as if to shut out the dreadful sound which he knew must be the next.

CHAPTER XX.

By the side of the Arno, near the spot where the river first enters Florence, was a small piece of enclosed ground, cut off from view of the city by a high wall, which was shaded by a double row of Ilex and Cypress trees. The bank sloped gradually down to the water, and was so covered with flowering shrubs, that it might have seemed a garden, had not the gleaming of marble, and the occasional elevation of a crucifix or obelisk, proclaimed that beneath the shelter of the flowers, hearts once as full of life as the bright blossoms in their gay spring time, now mouldered in the dust ! Many a gentle device, and many a rose-crowned urn, told of the tenderness which had outlived the parting hour ; and garlands of fresh flowers, suspended from the trees, marked out the place of the nameless grave, with a grace of sorrow more touching and more

true than could have been conveyed by any effort of the sculptor's art.

One tomb alone, of most elaborate workmanship, reared itself proudly so as to stand apart from the rest. Raised on a grassy mound, a bower of myrtle sheltered it from the sun ; and on the tomb and all around its base, the sweetest blossoms of that glowing clime lay scattered in profusion - - - The sun had scarcely shone upon the earth, yet ever and anon a fragrant cloud was wafted on the air. But whose is the hand now raised to feed its flame ? A young man kneels before the tomb ; his long black curls fall downward on his cheek, as, lower and lower still, he bends his head, until his lips have rested on the slab beneath. It is Giuliano de' Medici. What does he there ? Grief sits upon his brow ; and as, with clasped hands, he gazes on the tomb, the one word that seems to struggle to his sight as through the blinding tears he looks upon it, tells his sad tale—that word was “Simonetta !” the name of her who slept below ; the name that but a little while before woke rapture in the soul of one, who with a loving ear drank in

its sound ; and, from his breaking heart, the sad Giuliano vainly sighs—that word once more,—no answer comes ; the ear is closed, the lips are silent now ; and Giuliano kneels again, and weeps - - -

At this time, Giuliano de' Medici had scarcely reached his nineteenth year. Gifted with great personal beauty, and a highly accomplished mind, he was universally admired. Many were the bright glances that sought his own ; but he heeded them not, for his heart was with the gentle Simonetta. Her parents smiled upon his suit, and for a brief space of time he was most blest. But little recked the hand of death what ties it severs. A few days' illness, and Simonetta was gone—snatched away in her beauty and her bloom, ere the haven of bliss was won ! The young heart of Giuliano could ill bear up against the load of misery which had fallen upon it. A few days, and the whole world was changed to him. His early love was in the grave !—gone, with all the illusion of a youthful passion yet undimmed ; and abandoning himself to his grief, Giuliano had totally withdrawn from all society, finding no comfort, save in the daily visit he paid

to the resting place of her he had so fondly loved ! Vain had been all the efforts of his friends to induce him once more to join in their pursuits. The wound was too fresh ; and Lorenzo compassionating a weakness with which he could so deeply sympathize, forbore for a time to insist upon the appearance of his brother in public, feigning to believe in the constantly urged plea of indisposition.

The grief of Giuliano had been the cause of his absence from the masque at Fiesole ; and although it was not then publicly known, a rumour of the truth had subsequently reached the ears of the conspirators, filling them with fear, that, should he persist in remaining in seclusion, their plan of a double murder must prove abortive. The secret of the conspiracy was now known to so many, that every hour was fraught with danger. More than once, symptoms of wavering had manifested themselves, and it became of imperative necessity to determine the moment of the enterprise. Fearful that, should the celebration of another festival be selected, the same difficulty would again occur which had caused the failure of the attempt at

Fiesole, it was decided, that the occasion of a religious ceremony should be chosen; and the Legate, who was completely a puppet in the hands of the Archbishop and of his father Girolano Riario, was incited to express his desire of being present at the celebration of high mass in the church of the Reparata.

The time had now arrived; the Legate and the Archbishop set out from their respective residences with a splendid retinue, in which were comprised the chief number of the conspirators. Lorenzo also had quitted his palace; and the murderers already smiled in anticipation of success, when it was ascertained that Giuliano had left his house early in the morning, and did not intend being present at the mass.

Not an instant was to be lost; already the crowd was entering the church, when Francesco de' Pazzi summoned to his side Bernardo Bandini, one of the conspirators; and hurrying through the streets, went to the house of Giuliano. No intelligence could be gained of the probable direction in which the steps of Giuliano might have led him. His domestics were either really ignorant of the fact, or,

with the delicacy all feel for true sorrow, they refrained from exposing the grief of a master they loved, to the careless gaze of strangers.

The irritation of Francesco amounted almost to frenzy. He strode up and down the street, looking in all directions, but in vain. The bell had ceased tolling—the service was begun, and each moment that went by threatened destruction and discovery; for, should Lorenzo fall alone, the people would instantly rally round Giuliano, and not one of the conspirators could hope for escape. The excitement of Francesco was so strong, that he trembled all over; his knees knocked together as he walked, and every instant he seemed as though he would have fallen to the ground; when at length, after a little more time spent in fruitless watching, an exclamation from Bandini revived his courage; and Giuliano appeared in sight, walking slowly down the street, at some distance. Making a strong effort to regain his composure, Francesco, accompanied by Bandini, advanced to meet him, and, holding out his hand, exclaimed, gaily,

“ Why, dear Giuliano, one would think you had turned hermit, save that a holy man would

scarcely absent himself so often from his cell. We have been seeking you every day—but in vain.”

“ I have been unwell,” replied Giuliano, gently, “ or you should not have found me thus uncourteous.”

“ We come to pray you will honour the Legate and the Archbishop, by attending the mass which is even now being celebrated in their presence,” said Bandini, in the hope of giving his companion time to recover his composure.

“ Good friends, forgive me,” replied Giuliano; “ indeed, I cannot go.”

“ It will be most discourteous to your guests,” suggested Bandini.

“ I have already sent to tell them that I am not well. The crowd is irksome to me,” replied Giuliano, languidly.

“ We should not ask it,” said Francesco, who began to despair of changing the resolution of Giuliano, “ had not your brother entreated us to say it was his wish; and that he prayed you would for this day lay aside your sorrow, out of respect to your most reverend guests.”

“ Did Lorenzo say this?” inquired Giuliano,

as a faint blush stole over his cheek at this allusion to his grief.

“ He did indeed ; and as it is upon so solemn an occasion, I would entreat you to accede to his request. It is many days now since you have appeared in public,” answered Francesco.

“ My brother is so kind,” observed Giuliano, as if forgetting the presence of his visitors, “ so very kind, he will forgive it.”

Francesco cast a look of despair upon Bandini ; and the latter, addressing Giuliano, observed,

“ You will not, surely, refuse this simple request of so good a brother. Lorenzo entreats you, through us, to attend upon him this once—he is urgent in his prayer.”

“ So urgent,” suggested Francesco, who perceived that Giuliano began to hesitate in his determination, “ that there is surely some weighty reason for his anxiety.”

“ You think so ?” asked Giuliano ; and Francesco slightly winced under the calm searching glance Giuliano turned upon him. Was it possible that any suspicion of their intentions was the cause

of the reluctance of Giuliano to enter the church? The alarm of Francesco, however, was not of long duration; for Giuliano, totally unsuspecting of danger, and imagining that, as they had hinted, so there possibly might exist some weighty reason for the anxiety of Lorenzo for his presence, resolved to conquer the repugnance he felt, and to be present at the mass.

“ I am ready to attend you,” he said to Francesco, at the same time moving a few steps onwards.

“ You have forgotten your cloak and sword,” observed Francesco, after they had walked a little way, and that he was sure, from the melancholy and languid appearance of Giuliano, that he would not return to seek them.

“ They are useless,” he replied. “ The sun is powerful—and we go to pray, and not to fight;” and as he spoke a sad smile passed over his countenance.

“ There are those,” said Bandini, “ who need never wear a sword. To one who bears the glorious name of Medici, it would be peculiarly

useless," he added, as, with much courtesy, he bent his head towards Giuliano.

"Your words are too flattering," replied the latter; "but it were ungrateful to the good citizens of Florence, did I contradict your speech. They love us even as we love them."

"One need only to look around," observed Bandini; "the proofs of love rise up on every side. Cosmo, Piero, and now your most honoured brother, Lorenzo, live in the hearts of the people."

"And Giuliano," added the wily Francesco; "for though the youngest, not the least beloved;" and, as he spoke, he leaned his arm familiarly on the shoulder of Giuliano, pressing as he did so his fingers on the loose silk frock, in order to ascertain whether any defensive armour was concealed beneath it. But his fears were soon calmed. The warm soft flesh in which ere long he hoped to sheath the murderous dagger which he wore, was all that met his touch; and with revived hopes Francesco continued to lead him forward, beguiling the time with gay remark and honied word, until they had reached the door of the church. It was crowded

to excess; but all gave way as Giuliano entered; and a place was soon found for him on the opposite side from that which was occupied by Lorenzo; and there, meekly elevating his soul to God, Giuliano, with one of his executioners on either side, stood like a victim ready for the sacrifice !

CHAPTER XXI.

IT was not without much difficulty that Melanthe reached the church of the Reparata. More than once, she had mistaken the way which had been pointed out to her; and the streets being at that hour nearly deserted, she had been obliged to retrace her steps in order to obtain fresh directions. Each delay aggravated the excitement under which she suffered; and irritated almost to madness she hurried on, struggling against the feeling which, similar to that by which the sleeper is sometimes oppressed, seemed to retain her steps at the very moment when haste was the most requisite. Trembling and exhausted, she at length arrived at the church; but, on passing its portals, the mass of human beings which presented itself to her view, was so great, that, to find Lorenzo amongst them, appeared an almost hopeless attempt.

She endeavoured to advance towards the altar, but found it impossible. Breathless with fear, she paused for an instant to listen to the voice of the Priest; and with a shudder recognised the words of the short prayer which precedes the consecration of the Host. To cry aloud to Lorenzo to save himself was her first impulse; but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. One word of alarm might be his death warrant, for she knew the church was filled with his foes. She was in the midst of them, hemmed in on every side. Oh! for one moment of power to move—to see—to decide on what was best to be done. Must she stand there mute and helpless, with the dread secret on her lips, and the dagger of the murderers pointed at the breast of their victim? The thought was maddening; her sight failed her, and her brain whirled, beneath the fierce struggle to repress every symptom of alarm, for she knew that assassin eyes were glaring around, watchful of each stir, lest any accident might reveal their deadly purpose an instant ere the time.

One effort, and he may yet be warned! Melanthe drew her hood more closely over her

face, and with a swift though steady step withdrew entirely from the crowd, and, gliding along behind the pillars, came at length within view of the spot occupied by Lorenzo. It was a little to the right of the altar, in front of which were placed chairs for the Legate, the Archbishop, and some of the chief stranger guests; while Giuliano occupied the seat corresponding with that filled by his brother. To the left of Lorenzo, Melanthe instantly recognised Angelo Politiano, and others, who had been pointed out to her at Fiesole as the most intimate friends of the Medici; but her heart froze within her, as she saw the cowls of the two priests, his destined murderers, who filled the place immediately behind Lorenzo. One rapid glance assured her that he was still safe. A second later, and all would have been lost! She had contrived to pass the outer ranks of those who stood before her, when she heard the words resound from the altar, which were to be the death signal.

“*Hoc est enim Corpus meum!*” solemnly pronounced the Priest, as he raised the consecrated host. The bell rang, and every knee was bent, and every head was bowed, when, with a fearful

shriek, Melanthe threw herself suddenly forward, for she saw the cowed figure rise and the dagger gleam !

“ Lorenzo, save thyself ! ” was all she could utter, as, with a violent effort, she caught the uplifted arm of the murderer. He staggered, and the half averted blow fell faintly upon the neck of Lorenzo, inflicting a slight wound. The pain made him start from the ground, and, wrapping his cloak round his left arm, he drew his sword, and struck down his assailant at the very moment that a figure darting from behind, and endeavouring to clasp Melanthe in its arms, received the blow intended by the second priest for Lorenzo, and fell dead at his feet. It was poor Gennaro ! Faithful to the last, he had followed to protect her whom he loved, and in the effort he had perished !

“ Melanthe ! is it thus we meet again ? ” cried Lorenzo, as he sprung to her side, and, grasping her with one arm, defended himself with the other as he strove to gain the door of the sacristy, which was only a few paces behind him.

In an instant, the alarm spread around ; and a party of his friends, rushing to his succour, made a

rampart of their persons, and by pressing backwards, succeeded in clearing the entrance. Having placed Lorenzo in safety within the sacristy, Angelo Politiano closed the brazen doors.

The tumult in the church had become fearful. Giuliano, struck down with too fatal aim by Francesco and Bandini, lay dead before the altar; and such was the fury with which Francesco continued his attack, even after life had quitted the body, that he inflicted a severe wound upon himself, and fell prostrate by the side of his victim. The Legate, in an agony of terror, and surrounded by the priests, had taken refuge on the altar as a sanctuary: while the Archbishop, seeing Giuliano murdered, did not wait to ascertain the fate of Lorenzo, but quitted the church with thirty followers, in order to repair to the palace of the Signoria, and, proclaiming the death of the Medici, seize upon the seat of government, and reduce the magistrates to obedience.

The two priests, aware of the consequences which the failure of their attempt would produce as soon as it was known, silently crept from the church, and fled from the city. So great was the confusion

which prevailed in the first few moments of the attack, that those who were at the farther end of the church, could not immediately ascertain the cause of the disturbance, and, misled by the cry of "Fire!" which had been raised by the conspirators, rushed into the open air; while some, imagining that the roof was falling, fled away with shrieks of terror, thereby increasing the uproar and confusion to such an extent, that it was with difficulty they could be made to understand what had happened.

As soon, however, as they comprehended the matter, with one accord all returned, and, forming themselves into a body, entreated Lorenzo to place himself in the midst of them; then quitting the church by another door, that they might prevent his immediately seeing the body of Giuliano, which still lay before the altar, they conducted him safely to his own palace, and continued, supported by a body of troops, to keep guard over him.

Meanwhile, the Archbishop was making his way to the palace of the Signoria. On his arrival, he inquired whether any of the magistrates were in attendance, having, as he said, a communication of importance to make to them. His high rank pro-

cured him instant admittance ; and, leaving some of his attendants with orders to seize upon the gates at a given signal, he entered the palace, accompanied by the rest. The room, which joined that in which the magistrates were wont to assemble, was of a circular form ; and the Archbishop, who, it appeared, was aware of this circumstance, no sooner had entered the chamber, than he sent forward the officer by whom he was conducted, and directed the conspirators to close the doors gently as soon as he had passed, and then to await his signal from the inside room, when they were to rush in, and secure or put to death all who should offer any resistance.

“ You understand,” he said, turning to his followers, ere he quitted the room. “ I will go in as though I had business which I would transact with the magistrates ; and by standing close to the door you will be able to ascertain how many persons are present. If I cough once, then there will be only four or five ; but should you hear me cough several times, then be sure that the assembly is larger, and prepare your weapons, as the number of the enemy may give them courage ; but do not slay when you

can overpower without it. Do you understand me?"

"We do," replied several voices; and the Archbishop pushed the door, which had been left half open by the attendant, and disappeared through it.

He little suspected that the very means he had taken to secure his safety, would tend to his destruction. The room in which he had left his followers, was one which belonged to the Gonfalonière, or Chief Magistrate; and, to protect his person from treachery, it was customary, upon the election of each Gonfalonière, to change the locks and doors in a manner only known to himself and such as had charge of the palace. This information, not having been bestowed upon the Archbishop, he unsuspectingly allowed the door to close as he quitted the room; the secret spring moved, and his attendants were imprisoned by his own hand. Unconscious of danger, he advanced to the inner chamber, expecting to find it occupied by few persons, instead of which, having been summoned accidentally upon some question of state, the whole body of the Signoria was present.

Cesare Petrucci, the Gonfalonière, was the first

person who met the eye of the Archbishop, who would have willingly encountered any number of strangers, rather than have been thus suddenly brought into contact with this man. The Gonfalonière instantly rose to receive him ; and seeing that he remained standing near the door, begged that he would advance, at the same time placing a chair near his own seat at the head of the table. The Archbishop glanced round the circle ; but, as he raised his eyes to those of the Gonfalonière, and met the calm and resolute glance of the man whom he knew to be as much distinguished by his courage as by his virtue and talents, the firmness of the conspirator began to waver, and, without taking the proffered seat, he said, hurriedly,

“ I thank you—but I would not interrupt your conference. My business—is—is of a nature - - -” and stopping suddenly, he looked uneasily around.

“ Of a secret nature, perhaps,” suggested the Gonfalonière. “ If so, the hour is well chosen. From the Signoria, we have no secrets. Will it please your Lordship to sit?” he added, again offering the chair ; but the Archbishop only re-

treated nearer to the door, and seemed to have been suddenly seized with a violent fit of coughing.

“ I will not detain you,” he said, when it had subsided ; “ but,” and he turned his head anxiously towards the door of the circular chamber, which was visible from the spot where he stood ; “ but the Pope—his Holiness I mean - - -”

“ What of his Holiness ?” asked the Gonfalonière, apparently quite at a loss to account for the extraordinary hesitation of his visitor.

“ He has commanded me,” he replied, and again his cough interrupted him ! “ Great Heaven,” he said to himself, “ can it be that they do not hear me ? The door does not move.” He, in vain, endeavoured to control the emotion which every instant was gaining strength over him.

“ It grieves me to see your Lordship stand like a menial at the door—will it not please you to be seated ?” asked the Gonfalonière, who, like most people in authority at that period, being constantly exposed to treacherous attacks, was on his guard, and already suspected something from the pertinacity with which his visitor retained his position at the door.

“ I will stand here,” replied the Archbishop, “ if you will permit it; but I thank you for your attention,” he added, with an attempted gesture of courtesy, which was rendered ludicrous by the agitation of his manner. “ It gives me much pleasure to inform you that your son—but here - - -” and he began to draw from his bosom a variety of papers, which, one after another, from the trembling of his fingers, slipped from his grasp, and fell upon the floor.

“ My Lord the Archbishop is surely indisposed,” exclaimed one of the Signoria, as he stooped to pick up the papers, at the same time turning a meaning glance upon the Gonfalonière, upon whose brow he now read a confirmation of his own awakened suspicions.

“ I much fear it,” he replied. “ Nay, my Lord, you are very pale—this business will wait—let me summon your attendants.”

“ No, no !” cried the Archbishop, coughing still louder than before. “ It is nothing—I would deliver these credentials—the Pope ! My God, I am lost !” he exclaimed apart, as he strove to hold out the papers; but the trembling of his hands had

now extended to his whole body, and he shook from head to foot, while, with a face livid from agony, he continued to watch the door, which still remained closed.

“ Help ! help ! the Archbishop is ill,” cried the Gonfalonière, fully persuaded that some treachery was afloat.

“ Support him—see, his cough distracts him. Let some one summon his servants. You left them, I conclude, at the palace gate,” he added with a glance so keen and full of meaning that the Archbishop, to whom the last words were addressed, completely lost what little self-possession his terror had hitherto left him.

“ No, not the gate,” he exclaimed ; “ the round room—that door—open it. Will no one open it ?” he cried with a shriek, in the faint hope that he might yet be heard by his followers.

“ The round room ! Then they are safe ! Secure the traitor—call up the guard,” cried the Gonfalonière, drawing his sword, and rushing from the chamber.

In an instant, the Archbishop was seized ; while, in a paroxysm of terror, he shouted to his attend-

ants for succour. They heard his voice, but were unable to extricate themselves; while the Gonfalonière pressing forwards with shouts of "Treason!" endeavoured to arouse the attention of the servants and attendants of the court.

He had reached the top of the stairs, when a man bounding up the steps struck at him, ere he could reach him. The blow fell harmless on the balustrade, and the sword shivered on the marble, as the Gonfalonière seized the conspirator, whom he recognised as Giacopo Poggio. Dragging him by the hair into the chamber of the Signoria, he was, after a short struggle, securely bound by the side of the Archbishop, who, mute with the certainty of coming death, had passively submitted to be tied hand and foot to the heavy marble table in the centre of the room.

The alarm within the palace was now general. The followers of the Archbishop, who had been left to secure the gates, hearing the noise, and not receiving the expected summons from their companions within, suspected the cause; and, abandoning their post, rushed into the palace to the succour of their friends, but were instantly seized,

cut to pieces by the magistrates, who, with their guards and attendants, had armed themselves with any weapon they could find, and cut down all who attempted resistance.

Many of the rebels, finding themselves without a leader, submitted ; and the gates of the palace having been secured, the Signoria assembled themselves in an upper room, to decide upon the course they were to pursue. Scarcely had they entered the chamber, when their ears were assailed by the cry of " liberty ! liberty !" from the street ; and throwing open the window, they saw the venerable Jacopo de' Pazzi, mounted on a horse covered with ribbons, and followed by about a hundred soldiers, crying out " liberty !" and exhorting the people to join them. These were reinforced by a small body of troops, which came from the opposite end of the city ; and the magistrates perceived that an immediate attack upon the gates of the palace was meditated.

Misled by the supposition that the Archbishop was by this time master of the palace, the insurgents drew up before the gates, and demanded admittance. The answer they received was a volley

of stones; and with a wild cry of "the Pazzi and liberty!" they rushed to the attack, and, aided by the superiority of numbers, in a few minutes forced the gates. But their triumph was short; for the inmates of the palace, being now fully roused, hurried to the support of those who had given way; the rebels were repulsed, and after a sharp conflict, carried on almost hand to hand, the court was cleared and the gates again closed. At this instant, a large body of troops, escorted by an immense crowd, appeared at the end of the street; and the assailants, whose number was fearfully decreased, abandoned their attempt upon the palace, and fled in all directions.

CHAPTER XXII.

SCARCELY had the magistrates recovered from the suddenness of the attack which they had so gallantly repelled, when the body of people, whose approach had dispersed the insurgents, reached the palace, and the cries of the foremost announced to the Signoria the strange and terrible events which had occurred in the church ! But, as the soldiers advanced, a feeling of sorrow seemed to take place of the rage which the populace had exhibited the moment before ; and the crowd gave way as the troops filed to the right and left of the square, and presented to view the mournful procession which entered the gates of the palace.

Borne upon a temporary bier, the body of the murdered Giuliano was followed by his brother, and a large proportion of the nobles and citizens of Florence. Struggling with a grief almost too

heavy to bear, Lorenzo made a sign to the bearers to set down the corpse upon the steps of the palace; and, although the blood still trickled from his own wound, it was not of himself he thought, as, withdrawing the cloak, which had been thrown over the corpse, the mangled limbs, from which the flesh had been actually torn by the violence of the blows, lay exposed to every eye.

Lorenzo did not speak. He simply pointed to the body of his murdered brother—then clasping his hands, extended them towards the magistrates and people. The mute sorrow of this appeal was far more eloquent than words; and as, overcome by grief, he suffered himself to be led away by his friends, a deafening shout of execration against the murderers rose from every quarter of the city; while the cries of “Palle! Palle! Viva Lorenzo!” were intermingled with demands for instant vengeance, and entreaties that the traitors should be given up to the people.

For a few moments the Signoria deliberated, but the arrival of a body of troops, bringing with them the already half-dead Francesco de' Pazzi, determined the course that it was necessary to pursue.

The people no sooner discovered that the actual murderer of Giuliano was in the palace, than their fury rose to such a height, as to threaten more danger than might have been apprehended from the insurgents. With difficulty the soldiers prevented the populace from breaking down the walls; and many of the most influential of the citizens addressing the people, entreated their patience, while the magistrates within were deciding upon the fate of the prisoners.

“Death! death to the traitors! Give them to us! ‘Tear them in pieces!’” was the cry on all sides; while the crowd gathered, and stones were even thrown at the doors and windows of the palace, to quicken the movements of those within.

The whole population of Florence was by this time in a state of alarm; every instant fresh numbers flocked to the spot, and the uproar continued to increase. The people, excited to frenzy, had begun a furious attack upon the gates, when all at once the clamour ceased, and from that raving multitude not a sound was heard, while every eye was rivetted to one spot.

The balcony of the principal window of the

palace was exactly opposite to the gates. From the stone work of this balcony, which projected several feet from the wall, two men were busily employed in adjusting ropes ; and soon the sacred robes of the Archbishop were visible, as he was forced along by two soldiers, and lifted upon the edge of the balustrade. The noose was adjusted ; and Francesco Salviati, Archbishop of Pisa, was hanged like a common felon before the eyes of the astonished people. On one side, Giacompo Poggio, on the other, Francesco de' Pazzi shared the same fate ; and as the Archbishop, in his agony, found himself close beside the man whom he looked upon as the chief instigator of the conspiracy, his rage was so uncontrollable, that he seized with his teeth the naked arm of the murderer, and held it until death put an end alike to his hatred and his power.

The shout of exultation with which this barbarous exhibition was received, proved to the Signoria that the advice of the Gonfalonière had at least been judicious ; and that any mode of vengeance less public, or more mild, would only have kept alive the spirit of anger until it merged into one of distrust towards the authorities which

had thwarted their desires of vengeance. The people, satisfied for the time, dispersed to seek in other parts of the city objects for their rage; and before the close of the day, almost every person connected with the conspiracy was in the hands of the government. Some few were executed immediately; while others were thrown into prison, in order to obtain a more full disclosure of the plot.

Amongst these, was Luca Pitti, who, having fallen into the hands of the populace, as he was endeavouring to make his escape from the city, had been so maltreated that he was not expected to survive. Jacopo de' Pazzi had also been taken by them; and as he had been seen publicly inciting the people to revolt, no chance of escape was left to him; and the old man, who, against his better judgment, had been dragged from the peaceful retirement of his villa to become the leader of an insurrection, was hanged from the balcony of the palace, by the side of his nephew, Francesco, whose restless ambition and hatred of the Medici had been the mainspring of this infamous conspiracy.

For some days the bodies of the murderers were suffered to remain exposed, until the public rage

having somewhat moderated, they were taken down from the balcony and buried. That of Jacopo de' Pazzi was interred in the Church of Santa Croce ; but no sooner was the fact publicly known, than the tumult awoke again. The people rose in a mass, declaring that some awful visitation would fall upon their city, if the body of a murderer were suffered to remain within its walls. The fact that a torrent of rain so incessant and violent, as to be deemed supernatural, had fallen ever since such an offence against the sanctity of their church had been committed, was adduced by them as a proof of the anger of Heaven ; and the magistrates, anxious to calm the excitement of the people by appearing to yield to their prejudices, gave orders for the removal of the body to a distance from the city. But not even there was it suffered to remain in peace. A multitude of children, eager to imitate the spirit of fury they had witnessed in others, dragged the corpse from the grave ; and, after treating it with every indignity they could devise, threw it into the Arno.

The two priests, who had undertaken the murder of Lorenzo, were discovered in a Benedictine

monastery, and literally torn to pieces by the enraged populace.

Thus the chief actors in the conspiracy met, almost instantaneously, the fate they deserved: but there was one, who alone contrived to escape to a distance, and for some time eluded all the efforts of the Florentines to discover his retreat. This was Bernardo Bandini, who, with Francesco, had been the actual murderer of Giuliano. He saved himself by flight; and it was not for two years afterwards that he was discovered at Constantinople, having incautiously betrayed his secret. Mahomet II., aware of the anxiety of the republic of Florence to secure him, and being desirous of conciliating Lorenzo, caused Bandini to be seized, and sent home in chains, to receive the reward of his crime.

Thus ended a conspiracy, which, from the high rank and sacred calling of most of its chief actors, as well as the length of time the wanton spirit of hatred and ambition had been secretly nursed in the bosom of so many ere it was suffered to break forth, forms one of the most remarkable plots recorded in history.

The attempt to annihilate the power of the Medici, although ostensibly based upon a principle of liberty, was in fact but the desire of substituting one power for another. Had it succeeded, it would have remained still to be decided, whether the ambition of the Pope, aided by the revengeful spirit of the Archbishop of Pisa, for the affront offered to him by Lorenzo, or the hatred and jealousy of the Pazzi, goaded on by the discontent of Luca Pitti, and others of the principal nobles, each secretly hoping to supplant the other, would have triumphed. In either case, individual interest being the real motive, the grandeur or welfare of the republic could scarcely have derived benefit from the change; and the attempt to subvert the authority of the Medici, like all demonstrations of a spirit of rebellion against a government in no wise tyrannical, only created the evil they affected to deprecate.

From the fall of the Pazzi, may be dated all the inclination to despotism, of which, in after-days, the Medici were accused. Hitherto, they had ruled through the affections of the people; and the glorious inscription upon the tomb of Cosmo,

so beautifully called, “ the Father of his people ! ” sufficiently demonstrates the estimation in which they were held. The short but gentle rule of Piero did not belie the promise of his sire ; but upon the young Lorenzo, the hopes and hearts and pride of the Florentines were doubly fixed.

Lorenzo, whose unbounded generosity and powers of intellect and taste had early procured for him the title of “ The Magnificent,” was the idol of the people. In him, they saw united, even from his boyish days, all the justness of opinion, promptitude of action, and earnest love and pride of his country, which had distinguished his ancestors : added to which, the high cultivation of his extraordinary mental powers, and his exquisite appreciation of the merits of science and the arts, elevated him so much beyond all who had gone before, that his fellow citizens looked up to him not only with reverence and affection, but also with the proud feeling of minds capable of the just desire of fame ; as one, through whose almost miraculous gifts, their country and their name might be in after-ages gloriously celebrated. With these sentiments, it is not surprising, that the violence of grief and

anger which, upon the discovery of the conspiracy of the Pazzi, pervaded every Florentine bosom, should have driven a people naturally sensitive and excitable, beyond the bounds of justice or forbearance. It was with great difficulty that they were prevented from breaking into the prisons, in order to tear limb from limb the conspirators confined there.

The news of the wound of Lorenzo caused a general panic; and night and day crowds surrounded his house, filling the air with lamentations for Giuliano, and prayers for the recovery of Lorenzo. More than once he was obliged to show himself, to convince them that his wound was not of a serious nature. Notwithstanding that he was bowed down with grief, his address to the people was mild and courteous; and his most urgent and only prayer was, that they would allow the magistrates to decide upon the fate of the prisoners, and not, by an ill-regulated violence, confound the guilty with those who perhaps might be found to have been only partially implicated in the conspiracy.

The good sense of Lorenzo produced a beneficial effect; and he was rewarded for his forbearance

by the public manifestations of grief for the death of Giuliano ; while to himself a testimony of the estimation in which they held his person, was speedily offered by the decree of the Signoria, granting him Royal honours, and ordering that henceforth a guard of soldiers should attend upon him in public and keep watch before his palace,—a mark of distinction, which had never hitherto been bestowed upon any citizen of Florence.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHILE the city of Florence was still disturbed by these fierce and tragical occurrences, Melanthe remained at home, weighed down by grief. Yielding to the urgency of her entreaties, Lorenzo, after the first alarm had subsided, had reluctantly consented to allow her to return to the house of Caterina; and Melanthe had been conducted thither by an escort of his most trusty friends, who would willingly have borne along in triumph one, whom they justly looked upon as the saviour of him who was so dear to them.

Having fulfilled the duty which she had been called upon to perform, Melanthe sought anxiously to withdraw herself from public notice; and having only asked of Lorenzo permission to conceal the manner by which she had been made acquainted with

the danger in which he stood, she retired to her humble abode, and took her station by the body of Gennaro, which, at her request, had been conveyed from the church to the house of Caterina. And now, as she sat beside the breathless form of the poor Greek boy, who had been her constant friend through so many difficulties and dangers, she felt, indeed, that life had as completely closed for her as for the inanimate clay upon which her tears were falling. The untimely fate of Gennaro seemed to cast a still darker shadow around her. She was the cause of his death; and as he lay cold and immoveable before her, her mind wandered back to scenes of other days. She thought upon the many years when, ere passion had kindled or pride had hardened the heart of either, Gennaro had been to her as a brother,—when, as children, they had played together, studied the same task, and when the infirmity with which he had been afflicted had only endeared him still more to those who knew the gentleness and affection of his nature.

These days had passed; yet scarcely had the

grace of manhood begun to mingle with the wild gaiety of the boy, when the smile vanished from his lips, and the flush of his glowing cheek grew pale. Why had this been so? The heart of Melanthe sunk as it replied, "because of his love for her." He had loved her, and she, scornful and unpitying, had despised his affection. In the fullness of her own content, or the selfishness of her own grief, she had scarcely given a thought to his sorrow, nay, had sometimes even forgotten his very existence, until reminded of it by the sweet officiousness of love, which brought him ever to her side in the moment of danger or distress. And she had received his succour gently indeed, but with a calm coldness by which a nature like his must have been wounded to the quick. Was it then such a sin to have loved her, or, loving, to have buried his grief within his own bosom, and still watched over her with untiring patience? And for this she had never vouchsafed a word of comfort; but, entrenched within her pride, had concealed both her sorrows and her joys from one so loving and generous, that he would have wept

with her tears, and smiled if she rejoiced, even while his own heart was sinking under its grief and disappointment.

Now he was gone, and for ever ! without one tear of sympathy which might have soothed and reconciled him to the abandonment of his hopes. Oh ! could Melanthe, in that hour of stern self-communion which she held by the side of the dead, have recalled to her mind one instant when even a word of pity had been given to calm the tempest of hidden sorrow, or in which her unbending pride had stooped to confide in the heart she knew to be her own, what a ray of comfort would now have shone upon the darkness of her regret !

Frightened and shocked by the unhallowed addresses of the Cardinal, she had taken refuge in her virtue and her reserve, and for the moment all semblance of love bore to her eyes the same unholy tint ; and she had treated the gentle and submissive Gennaro with the same sternness she had displayed towards the iron-breasted libertine Borgia. If she ever had contemplated a line of conduct more marked by pity and by kindness, she had, as is so

often the case when we forget the uncertainty of life, deferred the execution of her plan to some future day; and now she felt that she had exercised a useless and uncalled for severity towards one who, if she could not love, was too good for her to have feared.

But regret was vain. Gennaro lay dead before her. Dead—and for her! Still for her had been his every thought and action: while Montesecco, he, upon whom her whole soul relied, had abandoned her—condemned her without a hearing. Equally tenacious in his pride, he had, upon a mere suspicion, cast her off, and now she was alone in the world. Alone! There is something in that word full of misery to the dependant nature of woman; and Melanthe shrunk from the thought, as, with trembling fingers, she clasped the frozen hand of Gennaro, and tried to banish from her mind the certainty that an hour was fast approaching when the tomb must claim its own, and she should be yet more terribly *alone*!

Heedless of her sorrow, the hand of time moved on; and Melanthe stood by the newly-made grave,

bathing with her tears the marble that covered the last resting-place of the poor Greek boy—the fond—the beautiful, and the true.

Then she felt anew the misery of losing a faithful friend—even if that friend be not of our own choosing, still it is a loss, that wrings tears of blood from the heart ! She looked upon the grave, and then hurriedly cast a glance upon the bright blue sky that canopied the earth—was there upon the bosom of that wide earth, one heart that loved her like that which now lay cold and still within the tomb ? It is a dreadful hour, when we ask this question, as we stand beside the last home of the dead ; and the silence seems to answer, “ No ! not one ! ”

And yet more dreadful is it, when, in the flush of life and health, the living tomb closes upon our hope, and the silence of the heart we trusted tells us we are abandoned, and doomed to drag on an existence of misery. Bitter indeed is this lot to bear ! and Melanthe, whilst she knelt by the grave of Gennaro, felt with anguish that she could better have endured to kneel by the tomb of Montesecco,

than to breathe the same air that he breathed, yet to know that his heart was estranged from her for ever !

“ Lady !” said Caterina, who had accompanied Melanthe to the funeral, “ do not weep any longer beside that grave ! Be comforted, the Holy Saints have taken your brother to their keeping. Come, let me lead you home.”

“ Not yet,” replied Melanthe, as with a fresh burst of weeping she threw herself upon the ground. Caterina knelt by her side, and endeavoured to support her upon her breast, gently caressing the beautiful head of Melanthe in the hope of comforting her.

“ I will go to the priest to-night,” said the poor woman, “ and he shall say a mass for your brother’s soul ; and I have money enough to buy a large waxen taper to burn before the shrine. Be comforted, my poor child ! You say you have rich relations at Rome, so you can endow a chapel, and he will pass lightly through purgatory. Do not grieve so, Signora !—he was so young and so gentle—he cannot have done much wrong. See,

here is your rosary—tell your beads, and the Holy Virgin will smile upon you from Heaven!—Here, take them, and I will say a prayer to the blessed Madonna myself!” and the good old woman bent down by the side of Melanthe, and prayed, and at length prevailed upon the weeping girl to rise, and saw with joy that she was more calm.

“I am glad we are going home,” observed Caterina, “for there is a crowd gathering before us; and the city is by no means quiet. Yesterday, after the funeral of the Signor Giuliano de’ Medici, the streets were in an uproar, the people wanted to break into the prisons.”

“Good Caterina,” said Melanthe, “had we not better go round by the upper bridge?—I am so afraid of the crowd.”

“We shall be safer in the public way,” replied Caterina, “for, if any danger happens, we can go to some of the soldiers. The streets are full of them; and besides, we shall pass the house of the Signor Angelo Politiano, and he desired me, if you wanted anything, to be sure to go to him.”

“As you will, Caterina,” said Melanthe; “I

only wish to get home as quietly as possible, and not to see any one."

But it was by no means the wish of Caterina not to see any one. For five long days she had been almost entirely shut up in her house, and her curiosity had been very imperfectly gratified by the few particulars she had been able to discover. They moved on therefore towards the city; and for some time their steps were unimpeded; but on entering the street where the palace of the Signoria was situated, they found the way thronged. Citizens of every rank mingled with the lowest classes of the people, children, women, and soldiers, so blocked up the passage, that it was almost impossible to advance. The multitude, though dense, was orderly; and, by the look of intense anxiety with which every face was turned to the door of the palace, some great event connected with it seemed pending.

"Good people, let us pass, if you please," said Caterina, pushing her way through the crowd, while Melanthe followed her.

"That is easier said than done," replied several, as they tried to make a little room.

“ Stand still in front,” screamed a shrill voice, “ we are pushed under the horses’ feet.”

“ Misericordia ! help me up ! ” said another, apparently from the ground, and a man divested of cap and cloak, and with his face covered with dust, was lifted from the earth, after having been nearly trampled to death.

“ Santa Maria ! we shall never get through,” said Caterina.

“ Let us return, pray do, good Caterina,” suggested Melanthe in a low voice, as she endeavoured to draw Caterina from the spot where she stood ; but it was now almost as difficult to recede as to advance, and Caterina had not the slightest wish to get out of the crowd.

“ You had better stand still, Signora, and wait for the decree,” said a young citizen, who, as the hood of Melanthe was dragged aside by the pressure of the crowd, had caught a glimpse of her beautiful face.

“ Ay, take the Signor’s advice,” whispered Caterina ; “ see, he has made room for you ; stand upon the step, and you will see better.”

Melanthe mechanically obeyed, and Caterina con-

tinued:—"Well, and what are you all standing here for? what are we to see?"

"Nothing," replied a surly looking man next to her; "but we shall hear."

"Hear what?" asked Caterina, who was dying with curiosity.

"Why, the decree of the Signoria, of course," replied the man.

"What decree? what is it?" urged Caterina; but the man only shrugged his shoulders, like many people, not conceiving it possible that others should be ignorant of that which he knew himself.

"Gentil Signor," said Caterina, to the citizen who had given them room upon his step, "what is the decree of which they speak? what is going to happen?"

"The magistrates are trying the prisoners implicated in the conspiracy," replied the citizen; "and the result will be announced to the people."

"Hush! silence!" was now shouted from all sides, and the window of the balcony was observed to open. In a moment every tongue was mute, and every ear was strained to catch the expected

words. The officer advanced to the edge of the balcony, and in a loud voice proclaimed that the Signoria had found the prisoners guilty, and that they were to be beheaded the next morning at sunrise in the public place. A deafening shout of exultation burst from the crowd, and ran along the street as the news was communicated to those at a distance, who could not have heard the words of the officer. The people were not yet sated with blood; and the news of the promised execution was received as though a festival had been proclaimed.

The crowd which had been pressed together into one mass now began to waver, and symptoms appeared of an intention to disperse. Melanthe, who bore with difficulty the sorrow which oppressed her, and who longed for the seclusion of her home, touched the arm of Caterina, and entreated her to try and advance. Just at that moment the gates of the palace opened; and, preceded and surrounded by soldiers with their swords drawn, the prisoners appeared, who had just received their condemnation. They walked bareheaded, and their arms were bound with cords to their sides. The

first that came was Giacompo Salviati, brother to the Archbishop of Pisa ; and such was the double detestation in which the crime of the murderous prelate was regarded, by a people, whose deep respect for their priests formed a striking feature in their character, that a torrent of abuse instantly overwhelmed him. Every opprobrious epithet they could devise was heaped upon him ; and mothers pointed him out to their children, as an object of hatred and contempt. The cheek of the old man blanched when he looked upon the threatening multitude, and instinctively he drew near to the soldiers, as the fierce words and execrations of the people met his ear.

Three others, whose dress and shaven crowns betokened to belong to the sacred calling followed, and were in like manner hissed and hooted by the crowd ; when all at once, as the fifth prisoner descended the steps, the tumult was hushed, for a moment there was a dead silence, and then above the stilled and pity-stricken multitude, rung out a cry of such thrilling agony, that every eye was turned towards the spot from whence it came.

The cry was that of the uncontrollable grief

that bursts from a breaking heart ; and, as it reached the ear of Montesecco, for it was his appearance in the character of a condemned culprit which had been its cause, he started, and his pale cheek glowed as he turned his eyes anxiously upon the crowd. His heart too truly told him that there was but one who could thus feel for him in his hour of danger and disgrace. For an instant the certainty that Melanthe was near, took from him the recollection of the position in which he stood ; and with violent efforts he endeavoured to burst his bonds, as he threw himself forward towards the spot from whence the cry had issued. He was soon recalled, however, to a sense of his unhappy situation by the soldiers who surrounded him, and who, seizing upon him, forced his steps in a contrary direction, and in a few moments he was lost to view. But the crowd, ever eager for an object whereon to vent its excitement, had now turned all its attention to the unfortunate Melanthe, who, senseless in the arms of those who had at the time been nearest to her, knew not the cruel and unjust remarks which were ventured by many of the bystanders, as, in order to recover her, the hood

and cloak were torn from her shoulders, and the rare beauty of her face and form revealed to every eye. In vain did poor Caterina, who immediately recognised in Montesecco the visitor who had come to her house at so early an hour, the day of the murder of Giuliano, attempt to deny that it was his appearance which had overwhelmed Melanthe with grief.

“ I tell you,” she persisted, “ she knows nothing of the prisoner. She has lost her brother—we were coming back from his funeral.”

“ That may be,” replied the surly man, who seemed, from the first moment, to have taken a particular dislike to Caterina.

“ But she knows the prisoner also, and I dare say was implicated in the plot.”

“ She, poor child !” exclaimed the pitying voice of a woman ; “ what does she know of plots ? Perhaps she loves him.”

“ Ah !” said another, “ he is handsome enough for that.”

“ Santa Maria ! What a pity to cut off such a head !”

“ Yes, and did you see what a beautiful form,— why, he was taller, by a head, than any of the soldiers,” replied a young girl, who was endeavouring to raise herself to catch another glimpse of Montesecco, as he moved down the street.

“ Now, by the bones of St. Peter, only to hear how women talk,” exclaimed the surly man ; “ what does it signify what the man’s head was like—it will be chopped off in the morning.”

“ But it does signify. You saw the people would not hoot at him—he was so beautiful,” said the girl. “ I tell you, he was the Ambassador of the Pope. I saw him at the masque at Fiesole, and he was the handsomest man there.”

“ And the grandest,” cried another ; “ I saw him come in, and, Madre di Dio ! but his dress was all velvet and gold and jewels—finer than the grand petticoat of the Virgin at our convent.”

“ Peace, will you ?” said the surly man ; “ if he is a noble knight, the more shame for him to be a murderer !”

“ He is no murderer, I dare be sworn,” said Caterina, who could not help feeling degraded by

the idea of being implicated with persons of such doubtful character. "But see—she revives—good friends, stand back, and give her a little air, and do not say such cruel words before her. I tell you she is unhappy—her brother was buried to-day."

"Poor thing! poor child!" was now uttered in various tones of commiseration by the volatile crowd, ever ready for a new impression.

"Yes, and moreover," continued Caterina, whose natural love of talking began to revive the moment she found that she was likely to escape being taken up as a conspirator; "only for the poor boy that she is mourning for, you, my good citizens, would have lost your ruler."

"How? where? what does she say?" asked a hundred tongues.

"I say," replied Caterina, whose self-importance was rapidly gaining ground, "that poor Gennaro, who was buried this morning, was killed in the church, trying to save Lorenzo de' Medici; and that this is his sister, that you want to make out a conspirator."

The declaration of Caterina, uttered with a loud

voice, produced an effect almost miraculous. The Florentines, wild and excitable to an extraordinary degree, had no sooner heard the words than they rent the air with shouts of applause; and having forced Caterina to tell the name of their new idol, they coupled it with every blessing and expression of fondness their voluble tongues could utter, pressing forward to kiss her hands, her garments, and even poor old Caterina, who found herself suddenly transported into a heaven of bliss.

In the midst of all this tumult of applause, Melanthe opened her eyes; and not being the least aware that it was directed towards herself, she imagined that by some means a reprieve or pardon had been granted to the prisoners, and, for an instant, a ray of hope lighted up her face, as she glanced towards the street leading to the prison. But the street was empty. The look of profound discouragement and misery with which she withdrew her eyes, and turned them upon the many faces which surrounded her, while the tears fell fast upon her cheeks, so deeply touched the heart of the sensitive people, that they ceased their clamour, and all, with one

accord, uncovered their heads, as if from respect to the deep grief by which they saw she was oppressed. This gentle tribute to her sorrow was a balm to the heart of Melanthe ; and as soon as she could move, she arose, and, leaning on the arm of Caterina, she bowed with a sad smile to those who had assisted her, and laid her hand upon her heart, for she could not speak. Many a blessing, and many a prayer followed her mute appeal to the sympathy of the crowd ; and more than one bright eye was dimmed with tears, as the people watched her whilst ascending the steps of the palace of the Signoria, whither she had made a sign to Caterina to lead her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE appearance of Montesecco, in the character of a condemned criminal, had occasioned a shock of so much severity to Melanthe, that her physical powers had been totally unable to support it. She had calculated with such confidence, upon his timely escape from the city on the morning of the murder, that she had never allowed her mind to dwell upon the possibility of his danger ; but Montesecco, although he had escaped from immediate death, had been captured ere he could reach the frontier ; and the very circumstance of his flight must have betrayed his secret, even had not the confession of others amongst the conspirators sufficiently implicated him to render the sentence of death an act of justice.

Even at that moment, when, by a timely declara-

tion of the circumstances which had led to his joining the conspiracy, as well as the fact of his secession from it, having been the means of saving the life of Lorenzo, he might have averted the fatal blow about to fall upon him, Montesecco had preserved silence. That proud and sensitive heart could not brook to lay open its workings to the eye of man ; and so deep was his love for her, who, he fancied, had cruelly wronged him, that death was to him far preferable to the misery of admitting to others even a suspicion of her unworthiness. His peace was gone for ever ; and with a feeling of proud despair he scorned to owe to the intercession of his rival the life which he had embittered. In silence, therefore, had Montesecco submitted to his sentence.

The unhappiness of Melanthe, although it had nearly paralysed her faculties, could not long deter her from the course which she felt she ought to pursue. There might be shame, there was misery in the disclosure she was about to make : but the life of a fellow creature was at stake ; and had the accused been one in whom she had never felt an

interest, the feeling of rectitude, which was the ruling principle of the conduct of Melanthe, would have led her to adopt the same course.

She entered the palace of the Signoria with one thought—to speak the truth, and no selfish consideration could have deterred her from her object. The moment when, impelled by circumstances so unforeseen, she had been forced to demand an audience of the magistrates, was well adapted to strike with awe a young and isolated stranger; and as Melanthe, separated from Caterina, advanced alone into the midst of that grave assembly of statesmen, for an instant her step faltered and her eye fell; but she rallied, quickly, as the thought of her high purpose rushed to her mind.

The whole body of the Signoria was present; and, as she scanned the faces which bent their curious looks upon her, not one countenance familiar to her eye appeared,—neither was any of the magistrates aware that she who stood before them was the saviour of Lorenzo. Though her cheek was pale and her lip trembling, such was the beauty and noble bearing of the afflicted girl, that a feeling of

interest and respect immediately rivetted the attention of all present.

“ I come,” she said, addressing herself to the Gonfalonière, who was distinguished by his occupying a seat raised above the rest, “ not to implore your pity, but to demand justice. But now, there is one gone out from your presence branded with a murderer’s name, to die a murderer’s death—Montesecco—the brave, the noble Montesecco ! He must not perish. And yet, Signori, I dare not say that he is altogether innocent, though guilty he cannot be, or I should not now stand here before you, nor would Lorenzo live !”

“ How !” exclaimed the Gonfalonière, as Melanthe, overcome by her feelings, paused for a moment.

“ What mean these words ? The name of Montesecco stands foremost on the list.”

“ It may have done so, and yet my words are true,” replied Melanthe. “ It was Montesecco, who revealed the whole of the conspiracy to me on the morning of the murder. I flew to the church ; and it was this hand, directed by his words, that saved

the life of Lorenzo de' Medici. Now, my lords, will you still say that he is guilty?"

The astonishment with which this communication was received by the assembly, produced silence ; but more than one look of incredulity was directed towards the chief magistrate ; and he, well aware that, in those days, none could trust the other, hesitated to give credence to her words, and replied, with a solemnity which froze her heart,

" The decrees of the Signoria may not be reversed."

" But if they are unjust?" cried Melanthe.

" The prisoner made no defence," was the reply.

" And that itself is equal to an admission of guilt," suggested one of the magistrates.

Melanthe turned her look from one to another with intense anxiety, and then exclaimed, with a trembling voice, " And will you show no mercy—no justice to one who repents even at the eleventh hour? Think, think what might have been the fate of Lorenzo, the fate of Florence, had it not been for the repentance of Montesecco ; and will you sentence him, who saved your city, to die a felon's death?"

To this appeal no immediate answer was returned. A whispered observation passed between some of the magistrates, and one of them, addressing Melanthe, replied,

“ Lady ! we grieve to seem to doubt your words ; yet, in so grave a matter, further proof would be necessary, to stay the execution of a criminal. We would gladly lean to the side of mercy, but in an hour like this suspicion becomes a virtue, for we know not whether we speak to foe or friend. Be not offended, then, if we should say so strange a tale requires some further confirmation.”

Whilst these words were slowly uttered, the changing countenance of Melanthe showed how bitter was the strife of feeling she endured. At one moment, horror blanched her lips, as she imagined the fate of Montesecco to be irrevocably fixed ; and then the recollection that by having refused to confide to the ear of Lorenzo the secret she had now disclosed, she had deprived herself of powerful aid, made her heart sicken : but when she heard the insinuated doubts of the magistrate as to the veracity of her tale, it seemed

as though the wild and throbbing blood must burst from the veins it swelled. She stood erect, her small beautiful head thrown back, and her flashing eye turned successively on each countenance before her, as if to choose the head on which to pour the torrent of the scorn with which such doubts had filled her.

With a firm step, she advanced, and laid her hand upon the table; but ere she could speak, the door opened, and Lorenzo, accompanied by Jacopo Orsini, Angelo Politiano, and a priest, holding some papers in his hand, suddenly entered. The surprise with which Lorenzo beheld Melanthe standing thus alone before the assembled magistrates, did not make him forget the anxiety he felt that she should be received at Florence with the honour and respect to which she was so justly entitled; and before he entered upon the business which had been his object in coming to the palace of the Signoria, he bent his knee before her, and reverently pressed her hand to his lips. Jacopo Orsini and Angelo Politiano followed his example; and the poor girl, who, a moment before, had stood

before the magistrates in the uncertain light of a suppliant, an impostor, or a spy, was, by this act of homage, raised in their eyes to the dignity of a queen.

The Gonfalonière immediately informed Lorenzo of the nature of her declaration ; and Melanthe could scarcely restrain a cry of joy, as the reply of Lorenzo reached her ear :—

“ Not only is it true, but Montesecco must be saved. I myself will pay his ransom, should the state demand it. And now, Signora,” he continued, turning to Melanthe, “ I would spare you the pain which it will cause you to listen to some of the disclosures about to be made to the Signoria ; but it may not be. The matter is too grave, and there is much that concerns you. I will therefore pray your patience, while the good father Piero reads the confession of the dying Luca Pitti—the foulest traitor that ever entered the walls of a prison.”

The magistrates started at these words ; for Luca Pitti, until the last moment, had contrived completely to deceive them ; and Melanthe having,

at the request of the Gonfalonière, seated herself at the council table, the priest proceeded to read the confession, by which was set forth the long succession of artifices which, between Luca Pitti and the Cardinal Borgia, had, for their individual purposes, been practised against Melanthe: and though the cheek of Lorenzo burned with a crimson blush, while the poor girl bent down her head, as the accusation against her, in which he was implicated, was related, yet neither shrunk from the trial; and a full confession having been made, the villainy of the projectors was laid bare, and the innocence of the victim fully established.

A burst of indignation followed this part of the narrative; but Lorenzo, entreating the assembly to have patience, desired the priest to read the sequel, which disclosed the motive of a long life of infamy, and divulged the secret of the birth of Montesecco, a secret which had never been suspected by any of the most intimate friends of Luca Pitti.

By this confession, it was clearly proved, that the real name of Montesecco was Uberto di Cione; that he was the only son of Martino di Cione, one of the

richest citizens of Florence, and cousin to Luca Pitti. Martino, having made a journey into France, accompanied by his son, then an infant, and Luca Pitti, was, with his child, supposed to have perished in crossing the Alps, during a severe snow storm; and his large fortune had, consequently, reverted to Luca Pitti. Part of it had been employed in building the palace which bore his name, and which was yet unfinished; but the greater part was still in his possession.

It was quite true that Martino di Cione had perished, but it needed an hour like the present to tear the secret from the guilty breast of the murderer. He had died by the hand of his cousin; Luca Pitti, was about to inflict the same fate upon the infant Uberto, when, either a feeling of compassion found entrance to his bosom, or his own childless state suggested another course. He spared Uberto; and having carried him to a distance, bribed some peasants to declare that he was their son, whom Luca Pitti had adopted. After a few years he became fearless of detection; he avowed his interest in the young Montesecco, and gave

him the education he was entitled to receive. The career of arms had been chosen by the young man, and such was the distinction he had gained as the redoubted Condottiere, that Luca Pitti secretly nourished the hope of seeing him one day master of Florence.

His marriage with Melanthe would have been a bar to these ambitious schemes; and Luca Pitti had, therefore, unscrupulously endeavoured to prevent it: but the failure of the conspiracy annihilated every hope; and the near approach of death had inspired the guilty wretch with a desire of making his peace with God by a full disclosure of the motives of his several crimes, and a total exculpation of the persons he had accused.

When the narrative was concluded, a deep silence reigned in the assembly. The complication of perfidy and crime with which the extreme of worldly ambition had overwhelmed the man, whose dying words had proclaimed his own guilt, filled every bosom with horror. Then, while all hearts sympathised with the poor orphan, who had first been despoiled of his inheritance, and then urged and

goaded into crime through the finest feelings of his nature, Lorenzo once more demanded of the magistrates the pardon and release of Montesecco. Many there were who would have given to him unconditional liberty ; but some, more tenacious than the rest, insisted that the same sentence should be pronounced upon him as that which, at the entreaty of Lorenzo, had been pronounced upon Guglielmo de' Pazzi, the husband of Bianca de' Medici, which was, that he should remain for ever at his country seat, which was distant five-and-twenty miles from Florence.

Again, it was urged that Guglielmo had actually been taken in arms against the Medici ; while Montesecco had quitted Florence before the murder.

At length, the wishes of Lorenzo prevailed ; and, with a glowing cheek and a beating heart, Melanthe saw the officer depart with orders for the unconditional release of Montesecco. He was to be free. Alas ! would his freedom bring happiness or misery to her ? This question was now soon to be at rest.

Escorted by Lorenzo and his friends, Melanthe,

no longer bowed down by the shame of suspicion, returned to the house of Caterina, who was almost distracted by the grandeur in which she found herself suddenly enveloped.

What was her surprise, when she found her humble room fully occupied; and Melanthe, who that morning had quitted the house in tears, now rushed forward in an ecstasy of joy, and was clasped in the arms of her father and Hassan.

Vanozia had not forgotten her promise, although its fulfilment had been attended with much difficulty, as Melanthe learned by a letter delivered to her by Elphenor. It was not until the liberation of Hassan from the prison of the Inquisition, that Vanozia had been able to communicate to him the secret of the escape of Melanthe. Without delay, Hassan revealed the disgraceful history to the ear of the Pope. Sixtus being at that moment completely absorbed in the movements of the conspirators against the Medici, became filled with alarm at the prospect of the additional scandal which the attempt of the Cardinal would, if made public, entail upon the church; and joyfully accepted the

offer of Hassan to quit Rome for ever, the instant that Elphenor should be restored to freedom. Without apprising the Cardinal of his intentions, the Pope commanded the immediate liberation of the prisoner; and Hassan with Elphenor were on their way to Florence, ere Borgia was aware of such a step being contemplated. On discovering what had occurred, his rage at first knew no bounds; but receiving, the next day, intelligence of the escape of Melanthe from the brigands, he was forced to smother his resentment, and secretly to acknowledge himself baffled on all sides.

“Poor Vanozia,” said Melanthe with a sigh, as she folded up the letter, and recollected the beauty and the sorrow of the writer; but in another moment the embrace of her early friend, Clarice, and the clamour of delight with which Mariana, who had accompanied Hassan and Elphenor, overwhelmed her “dear child,” drove away all thoughts of sadness from her mind.

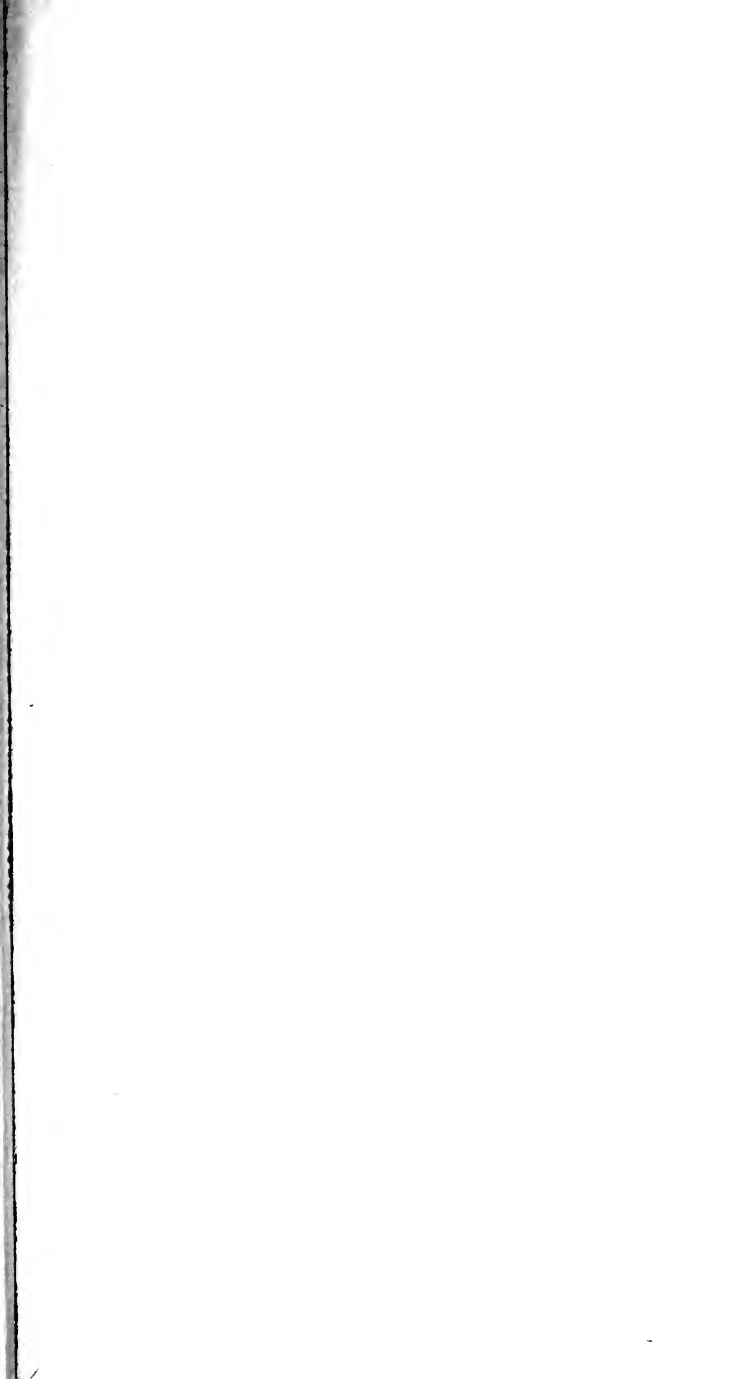
And then, after a little while given to the overwhelming joy of this re-union, there was a deep silence. There was one missing from that

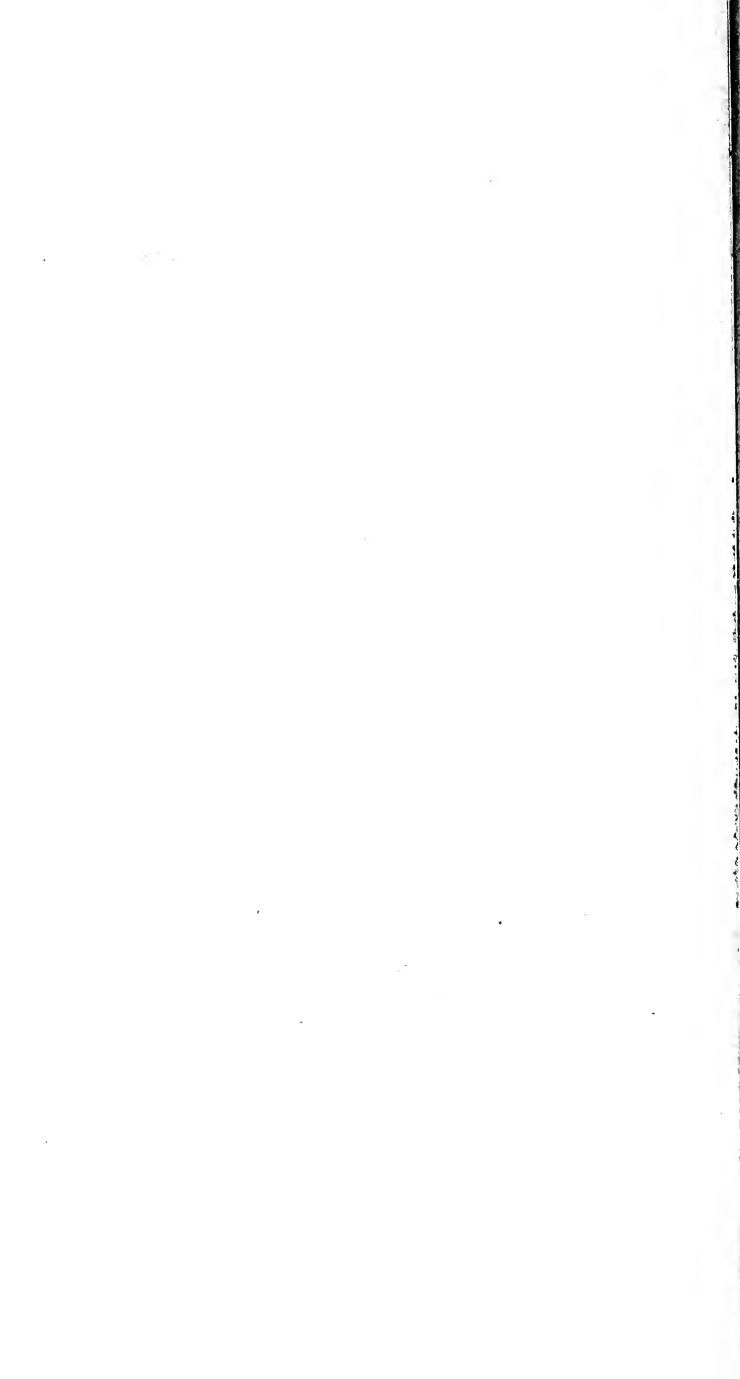
happy group, and the name of "Gennaro" drew tears from every eye. Poor Gennaro! and yet was he not happier than if he had awaited on earth the events that were destined to happen?

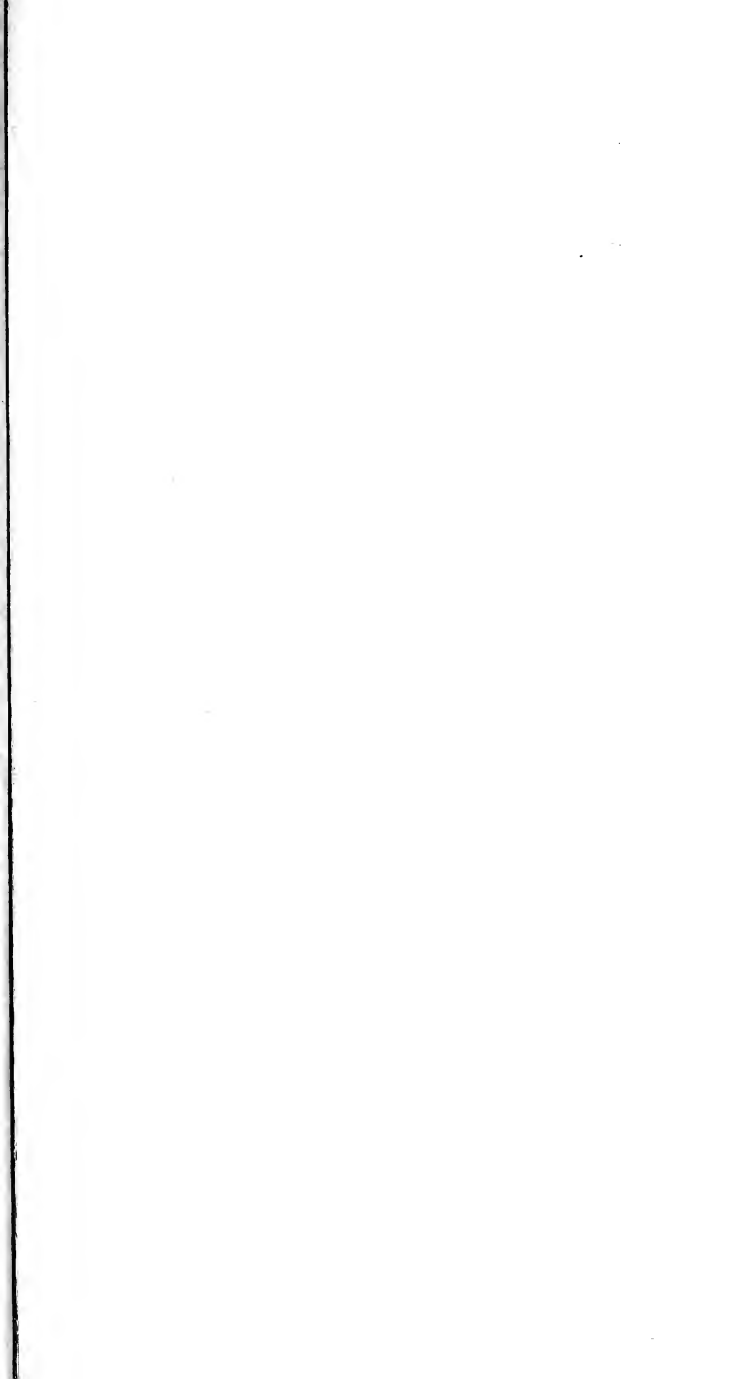
Lorenzo also wept for the death of Giuliano; but when the days of his mourning had expired, joy once more shone upon all hearts; and, amidst the prayers and the blessings of his fellow citizens, to whom his recent danger had doubly endeared him, he was married to Clarice Orsini, on the same day that Montesecco became the husband of Melanthe.

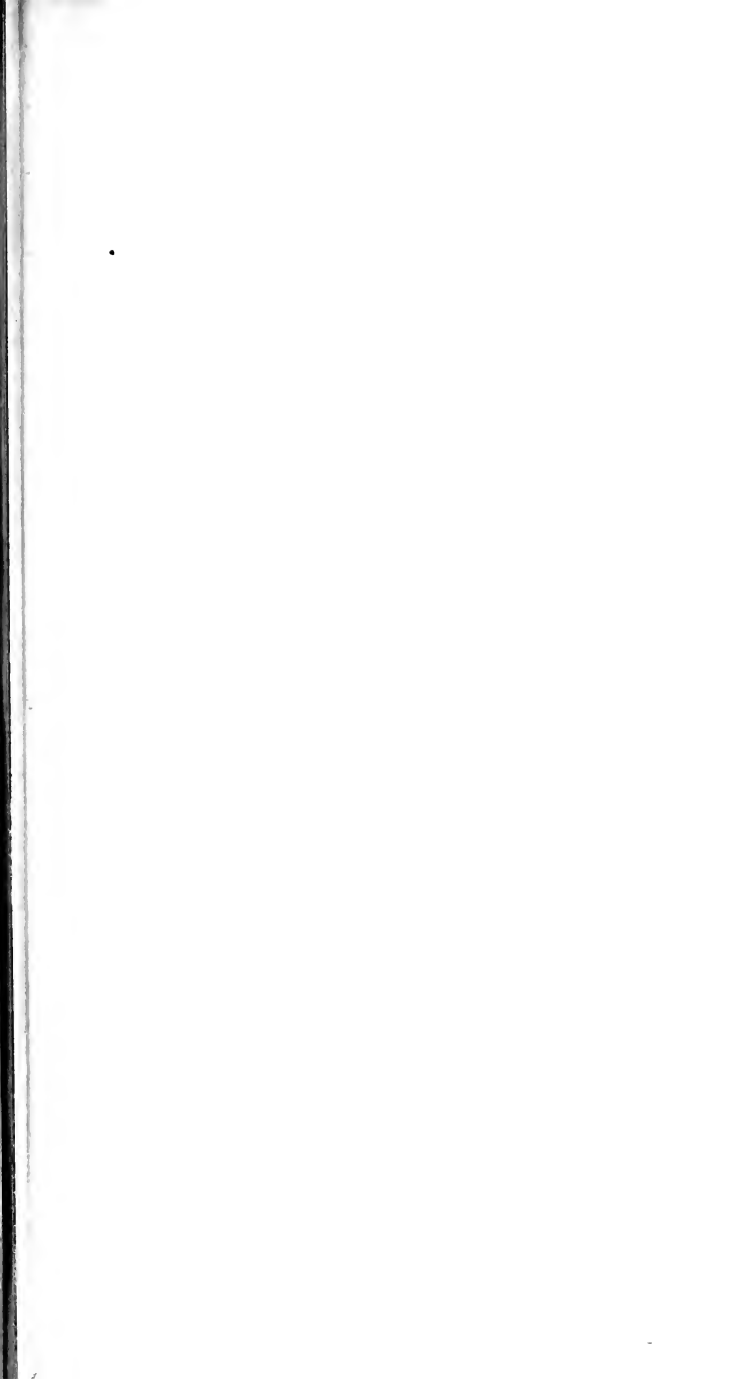
END OF VOLUME III.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY J. MITCHELL AND CO. (LATE BRETTCELL),
RUPERT STREET, HAYMARKET.









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